

1994

## Feminist excavations: a collection of essays on women, the family and ideology

Dani Stehlik  
*Edith Cowan University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks>



Part of the [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#)

---

Stehlik, D. (1994). *Feminist excavations: a collection of essays on women, the family and ideology*. Joondalup, Australia: Centre for the Development of Human Resources, Edith Cowan University.  
This Book is posted at Research Online.  
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks/6828>

# Edith Cowan University

## Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

- Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.
- A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement.
- A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

---

**Faculty of Health and Human Sciences  
Centre for the Development of Human Resources  
Social Research and Development Monograph No. 10**

JOONDALUP

# UNIVERSITY COLLECTION

## FEMINIST EXCAVATIONS

A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS ON WOMEN,  
THE FAMILY AND IDEOLOGY

by

**Students of Applied Women's Studies**

Edited by

**Dani Stehlik**



**EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY**  
PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA

---

---

# **CENTRE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES**

**Social Research and Development Monograph No. 10**

## **FEMINIST EXCAVATIONS**

**A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS ON WOMEN,  
THE FAMILY AND IDEOLOGY**

**Students of Applied Women's Studies, Edith Cowan  
University. Edited by Dani Stehlik, Research Associate,  
Centre for the Development of Human Resources and Lecturer  
in Applied Women's Studies, Edith Cowan University,**

ISBN: 0-7298-0164-0

© Copyright Stehlik April 1994

This monograph is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the copyright act, no part may be reproduced by any process without permission. Enquiries should be addressed to Dani Stehlik, Centre for the Development of Human Resources, Edith Cowan University, Joondalup Drive, Joondalup, WA, 6027.

---



## **Acknowledgements**

---

This is a body of work that grew out of an enjoyable and challenging semester's teaching in 1993. All the women who contributed to this collection and the women who participated in our weekly discussions approached the material with an openness and keen desire to know more. My sincere and warm thanks to them all for a wonderful experience.

My appreciation too to Lekkie Hopkins who, as Women's Studies Coordinator, gave me the encouragement to undertake this task. Finally, sincere thanks to Michelle Stanton from the Centre for the Development of Human Resources who assisted in the preparation for publication of this monograph.

# Contents

Acknowledgements .....	iii
Introduction: Women, the Family and Ideology. <i>Dani Stehlik</i> .....	1
 PART ONE: IDEOLOGIES .....	5
Essay One: Tears in Paradise: "Original Sin" and the Fear of Women. <i>Julie Whittle</i> .....	6
Essay Two: Legal Ideology: Feminist Excavations. <i>Emma Mills</i> .....	17
Essay Three: The Creation of Gynaecology: A Heavenly Benefaction or a Hellish Affliction? A Retrospective View of Gynaecology. <i>Ann Eames</i> .....	27
 PART TWO: ROLES .....	38
Essay Four: Gender Roles and Inter- personal Relationships: The Concept of "Mothering". <i>Rebecca Pauley</i> .....	39
Essay Five: Sisterhood or Motherhood? Is the Childless Wife a Feminist Peer? <i>Helen Bulis</i> .....	45

Essay Six: Where do the Stresses Within the Struggle for a Lesbian Family Come From? <i>Leanne Klein</i> .....	59
Essay Seven: Only a Housewife? Housework and the Ideology of the Home. <i>Angela Moore</i> .....	69
 PART THREE: ISSUES .....	 80
Essay Eight: The Impact of Domestic Violence on the Psychology of Women. <i>Megan Dawson</i> .....	81
Essay Nine: A Family Problem: Society's Secret. A Socialist-Feminist Analysis of Incest and Child Sexual Abuse. <i>Robin Walshe</i> .....	90
Essay Ten: Fertility Cycle Control: Abortion and the Medical Profession. A Feminist Analysis. <i>Carol O'Donnell</i> .....	105
 ABOUT THE PUBLISHER .....	 117

---

## **Introduction: Women, the Family and Ideology.**

***Dani Stehlik***

---

Applied Women's Studies at Edith Cowan University in Perth, Western Australia is now entering its seventh year. The program has consisted of an undergraduate minor within the Bachelor of Social Science degree as well as a Graduate Diploma. 1994 is an exciting milestone for the program as it moves into a Bachelor degree with Applied Women's Studies as a major. The Graduate Diploma program will also continue. The aim of the program is to:

develop the theory and knowledge necessary to understand the issues and concerns of women and their roles in society. By taking an applied focus, it develops the skills needed to work in those areas of service development and social change where women are the primary focus.

**Women, the Family and Ideology** is a key unit within the Applied Women's Studies Program and in 1993, it was offered as a third year unit. As part of their assessment, students were invited to explore in depth, an issue which interested them within the broad context of the unit. Students were asked to consider the **historical context** and **ideological perspective** of the theme they were analysing. The **feminist critique** was to be identified and discussed within this framework. As feminism does not have one theoretical basis but a number, students were asked to identify and analyse the feminist theoretical construct that best suited their argument. These essays are a collection from those submitted. A brief background to the broad context of the unit will now be given.

### **A Historical Analysis of the Ideologies which Circumscribe Women's Lives**

Judith Allen argues that "feminism has always engaged with the practice of history" (1986, p. 173). One of the purposes of this unit was to try to understand why that is so. Our perspective of history is often clouded by time and distance and in our desire to know the 'here and now', we tend to dismiss the past as irrelevant. A feminist consciousness teaches us that we need to understand the past and its direct impact on the present. For example, domestic violence, incest and crimes against women and children were being debated by European women of the Middle Ages in much the same way as

they are being debated by Australian women today, a fact not often realised. An understanding of the impact of the Age of Enlightenment with its 'scientific objectivism' and the cult of the individual on the way in which women's roles have been and continue to be constructed within our Western society, was also an essential learning focus to the students' growth of consciousness.

Students found the unit as a whole and the task of writing their individual papers, to be a stimulating challenge. The body of work which has emerged ranges from an analysis of the concept of "Original Sin" and its subsequent impact on women's lives over the centuries, to an exploration of the role of Family Planning organisations within the abortion debate in Western Australia. The papers are linked by their feminist theoretical base and their concentration on the impact of ideologies on the lives of women, past, present and future.

## **The Ideology of the Family and the Dominant Paradigm**

Margaret Sargent's definition of ideology as "a system of ideas, beliefs and values [which] derive originally from the interests of certain social groups, who use power actively to persuade others to adopt them" (1988, p. 21) describes the way in which students were invited to consider the dominant ideologies that together circumscribe our lives. As "perspectives on life which favour the interests of certain groups", ideologies frame the concept of the dominant paradigm. A feminist critique of the dominant paradigm begins with an analysis of the historical roots of ideologies. This, as McLennan points out, "involves the critique and transformation of existing practices and concepts" not just "seeking out heroines or of restricting history to women only" (1981, p. 120).

The dominant paradigm has a powerful impact on our daily lives, on the institutions that control our lives and on the way in which we, as women, live our lives. In the academy, this paradigm is often described as 'positivist' or 'functionalist'. Judith Allen's view is that:

Positivist conceptions leave little room for deduction, inference, symptomatic reading or accounting for absences and silences in extant evidence. Instead, they perpetuate the phallogentric preoccupations by which they were designed as methods of knowledge (Allen, 1986, p. 176).

These essays are an attempt by the students to undertake a personal exploration of the nature of the dominant paradigm through an analysis of the historical past of particular issues and the way in which the ideologies that underpin the paradigm developed over time around these issues.

It is clear, then, that the subject of **Women, the Family and Ideology** has complex, many faceted and multi-layered dimensions that require careful analysis or 'excavations' in order to begin to understand what it means to be a woman in the last decade of the 20th century in Australia. As this is the International Year of the Family, we believe that the collection is a timely contribution to the debate.

### **This Collection and its Preparation**

This collection of student papers is the first such brought together and published by the Centre for the Development of Human Resources at Joon-dalup campus. Students were invited to submit their papers and in preparation for publication, each student read one other student's work, made comments, suggestions and criticisms. These were then incorporated into the final paper. Two papers came to this collection from another 1993 Women's Studies unit **Women, Sex Roles and Communication**. As editor, I wrote this introduction and the brief introduction to each essay. Where historical figures are mentioned, the years of their lives are given as footnotes. We hope that the bibliographies attached to each essay will whet your appetite and send you searching for more material.

This collection of essays is eclectic: its commonalities are feminism, history, ideologies and women's lives. Students conceived their topics and their titles and undertook all the research necessary themselves. In most of the papers, the writers reflect on their own lives and the impact of having their consciousness raised. The essays have been grouped together under three major headings: **Ideologies; Roles; and Issues**. These student papers are the first, we hope, of many. The ideas they raise and the issues they discuss are immediate and of interest not just to other students, but to a wider community audience. We hope that you enjoy them and find them challenging and interesting.

**Dani Stehlik**  
Editor

---

## References

- Allen, J. (1986). Evidence and silence: Feminism and the limits of history. In C. Pateman and E. Gross (Eds.). **Feminist challenges. Social and political theory.** (pp. 173-189). Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- McLennan, G. (1981). **Marxism and the methodologies of history.** London: Verso.
- Sargent, M. (1988). **Sociology for Australians.** (2nd Ed.). Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.

**Part One:**  
**Ideologies**



---

## **Essay One: Tears in Paradise: "Original Sin" and the Fear of Women. Julie Whittle**

---

*In this fascinating analysis of the doctrine of Original Sin, Julie Whittle describes the fundamental impact of religious ideology on the roles of women, both past and present, and the ways in which the teachings of the fathers of the Western Church are still subscribed to within our culture today. Julie makes a strong connection between the Protestant Reformation, the King James version of the Bible, the "ideal woman" of the Victorian age and the way in which modern women are circumscribed in their sexuality.*

Two thousand years of Christianity has had a profound effect on shaping western society. Almost every aspect of our lives has been influenced by the religious ideology which held such a strong position in our past. This religious ideology has largely had a detrimental effect on women. The world of Western Christianity has always had a deep fear and hatred of sex. Christianity has taught men that sex is sinful. Consequently, they have learned to fear and hate women because they tempt men into this sinful sex. The doctrine of Original Sin is a crucial component of Christian ideology and is the basis of the Christian (and thus Western) view of women.

When examining religious ideology, it is important to make the distinction between official doctrines and the biblical references which inspired them. The doctrine of Original Sin was created from several different biblical references — the stories of the Creation and the Fall in the Old Testament and in the First Epistle to Timothy in the New Testament. I will argue that the concepts contained in these verses were distorted with new, highly misogynistic meanings that were not necessarily meant by the original authors. This is not to say that the Bible is not sexist and does not devalue women — clearly it does in many instances. Rather, it is to say that the doctrine of Original Sin has taken that sexism and devaluation to the extreme.

This paper will show that the source of the doctrine of Original Sin is to be found in the story of Creation in the Old Testament Book of Genesis. I will follow the course of the doctrine from its formation in the first four centuries AD by the Western Fathers of the Church, through nearly 2000 years of Western Christianity. The doctrine of Original Sin and the resulting views of women have permeated all levels of our society and continue to do so in the twentieth century. During a brief history of the Christian religion, I will pause at length in the 16th century to examine how the doctrine of Original Sin was absorbed into official Protestant ideology concerning marriage and the family

---

during the period of the Reformation. I will pause again in the 19th century to observe the way this 16th century ideology impacted on the Victorian Era — the Victorian model of marriage being the epitome of that idealised during the Reformation. Finally, in viewing the 20th century, I will specify the ways in which the doctrine of Original Sin still influences our lives, through societal attitudes, literature, family structures and the court system, especially in cases of rape, sexual harassment and sexual discrimination.

\* \* \*

✱ Religious ideology is closely linked to the Bible, since it is the Bible which forms the foundation of Christianity. Ideologies and doctrines are always backed by biblical references which, on the surface, appear to support a given position. As regards women, a preacher is always able to produce Bible verses as evidence for the inferiority, the wickedness or the weakness of women. When sexist ideology is combined with apparently supporting evidence from the Bible, it is a powerful persuader to the believer. It is, therefore, important to examine the ways in which the Bible has had such a profound effect and influence throughout history and has laid the foundations for the ideologies which were formed from it.

The Bible has had a strong history and influence in Western culture. It has been around for a long time. Parts of the Old Testament date back over 3000 years while the most recent parts date back almost 2000 years and the New Testament to the 4th century AD. The Bible has been continuously available within Judeo-Christian societies to a far greater degree than any other book or piece of literature over the last 2000 years. It is the most widely printed and distributed book in history.<sup>1</sup> It has been translated into over 200 languages and some parts of it into a further 1000 languages. The Bible has traditionally held a special place among books, particularly in the household. If a house contained only one book, that book was almost certainly the Bible. Since it was often the only book in the house, most people learned to read from it so it began influencing people at a young age. The illiterate in society have had greater access to the Bible than to any other book or piece of literature as, if nowhere else, readings from the Bible could be heard every week in Church (Harris, 1984).

The Bible has been around for a long time, influencing society and until the 20th century, Western society has been essentially Christian. To a certain extent, power lay with the Church. Ecclesiastical law was the law and it affected the political, social and private lives of citizens. The Church provided education and there was none to be had outside of it. Even as late as the 19th

---

century, it was still necessary to subscribe to the 39 Articles of the Church of England to be admitted into Oxford or Cambridge Universities. This means that not only the Bible, but also the Church and the accompanying official dogma which included the doctrine of Original Sin, had an effect on people's lives.

The doctrine of Original Sin, as it appears in official religious ideology, is not to be found in the Bible as it is an invention of the Christian Church. It did not appear in its final form until after the 4th Century AD. The background for the doctrine is the creation story in the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament. The story goes that when Adam and Eve were created in the Garden of Eden, they were born of innocence and were free of sin. Eve was subsequently tempted by the serpent/Devil to eat of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. When she gave way to temptation, ate the fruit and also gave it to Adam, she destroyed their innocence. In this moment, sin was set free in the world from which mankind would forever more suffer sickness, pain and, eventually, death. Logically, it would seem that the account in Genesis is not a documentation of an actual event, nor was it ever meant to be. Ormerod (1992) suggests that:

the author's purpose in writing this is to given an aetiological explanation for what he sees as a present disorder. Why is it that women suffer in childbirth? Why is it that men dominate women? (p. 188).

I would subscribe to this position. The story of the Creation and the Fall is meant to be taken symbolically as a possible justification for an existing situation, otherwise, the story makes no sense at all. Nevertheless, people accepted the story as literally true and it is still considered so by many fundamentalist believers.

The doctrine of Original Sin was formulated in the first four centuries after Christ by the Western Fathers of the Catholic Church, most prominently Tertullian and Augustine. These men were charismatic and highly influential. Western Christianity had its roots in their teachings, hence the title of "Western Fathers of the Church". The theology of Augustine dominated and sustained the Church right through the Dark Ages. The Western Fathers can be characterised as fundamentalists in their beliefs and in their anti-sexual sentiments. They have been termed "twice born" Christians (Armstrong, 1986, p. 33) which means that their conversion to Christianity was characterised by traumatic and violent religious experiences. They were unable to reconcile

their sexuality prior to their conversion with their subsequent religious lives. They gave up all connection with their lives prior to conversion and embraced a theology which was fundamentalist and literal in its belief system.

For the Western Fathers, the story of the Creation and the Fall was not to be taken symbolically. It was to be taken literally. Adam and Eve were believed to be actually created by God and were eventually banished from the Garden of Eden. For Augustine<sup>2</sup>, the result of Adam and Eve's disobedience in the Garden of Eden was **concupiscence** — violent sexual desire so strong as to be against all reason. The act of eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge did indeed release sin in the world but it is concupiscence that forces us to sin because we cannot resist sexual desire. Concupiscence is the essence of sin because it makes us lose all sense of reason. Already it can be seen that there is a strong link between sin and sex, because nowhere else but in sex is this violent desire and loss of reason felt so strongly. Sex has become inextricably bound to the notion of Original Sin. Adam and Eve engaged in sex before they were exiled from the Garden of Eden but Augustine asserts that this sex was unsullied by desire. Its purpose was not physical pleasure, but the conception of offspring in obedience to God's command to "go forth and multiply." After this disobedience, their innocence was violated, sex was no longer possible without concupiscence and, thus, it was no longer rational or good. Sex is the means whereby Original Sin is passed on to each generation. Every child born has sin passed on to it by its copulating parents.

In formulating the doctrine of Original Sin, the Western Fathers stressed the involvement of Eve in the downfall of man. Augustine calls Eve the cause of Adam's sin. She was weak and was deceived. She was evil and she deceived Adam into eating of the fruit. This notion can be seen to have its roots in the First Epistle to Timothy in the New Testament:

In like manner also, that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array. But (which becometh women professing godliness) with good works. Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, not to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression. Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety (1 Timothy 2:9-15).

---

In his discourse, *On Female Dress*, Tertullian<sup>3</sup> expands on this very theme. He begins by saying that any woman who knows the Lord would “go about in humble garb and go out of her way to affect a meanness of appearance.” The dissertation then descends into a direct and calculated attack on women.

And do you not know that you are each an Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. **You** are the devils’ gateway: **you** are the unsealer of that forbidden tree: **you** are the first deserter of the divine law: **you** are she who persuaded him who the devil was not valiant enough to attack. **You** destroyed so easily God’s image, man. On account of **your** desert—that is death—even the Son of God had to die. And do you think about adorning yourself over and above your tunic of skins? (cited in Armstrong, 1986, p. 61).

It is this view of Eve which is at the heart of the doctrine of Original Sin. As he proceeds with his essay, it can be seen that Tertullian’s view of women is based on his fear of sex. According to Tertullian, if a woman, through her beautiful appearance, causes a man to have lustful thoughts then she is guilty because she is “the sword that destroys him.” Women are obliged to make themselves as unattractive as possible:

(natural grace and beauty) must be obliterated by concealment and negligence, because this is just as dangerous to the people who glance at you...Comeliness...is to be feared, because of the injury and violence it inflicts on the men who admire you (Ibid, p. 62).

The doctrine of Original Sin has effectively bound together sin, sex and women as the causes of the downfall of man. The doctrine of Original Sin was taken up in the 16th century, most notably by Martin Luther.<sup>4</sup> It was given a new lease of life and put into a new context but the abhorrence of sex and of women remained. Luther’s views of sex were much the same as Tertullian’s had been centuries before and, similarly, he too was a “twice born” religious convert. The doctrine of Original Sin in the context of the Reformation took on the relationship between sex and marriage. For Luther, marriage was a necessary evil because it supplied a legitimate outlet for man’s uncontrollable lust. Luther was against celibacy, which had been ingrained in the Catholic Church tradition, because he felt that celibacy was impossible given that man

is driven by concupiscence. The only possible answer was that a man should get married because sex within marriage would be marginally less abhorrent to God than would sex outside of marriage.

The Lutheran view of marriage has not been good news for women. If marriage is only desirable because it supplies an outlet for male lust, then clearly women can only have value as sex objects. The Christian neuroses about sex which led to the formation of the doctrine of Original Sin had found their way into official Christian doctrines concerning marriage. This meant that women were, once again, seen as the root of all evil because of the continuing emphasis on the role of Eve in the downfall of man. Luther wrote that marriage is woman's punishment for the sins of Eve. The husband will rule the home and will go out into the world to work. The wife will stay at home and look after the house because she is not fit to tend to affairs outside.

By their private confessions to priests, by their vows of celibacy and by their mystical yearnings for full union with God, Catholic women for centuries were, in a sense, detached from full and intense family relationships, as a woman never belonged wholly to her husband and was never completely defined in terms of her sexuality for there was always the prior bond of the soul to God. In contrast, the Protestants, by supporting the family structure known as 'restricted patriarchal nuclear', sought to define women entirely in terms of their sexuality. They insisted that the only natural state of women was as wives whose duties included recognising their husbands, already their legal guardians, as their spiritual advisers.

The rise of the cult of the Virgin Mary is an important manifestation of the doctrine of Original Sin. The pure goodness represented by the Virgin Mary is seen as a counter to the inherent wickedness of Eve. The Madonna has been described as a "kind of Eve, incapable of Fall" (Trugill, 1976, p. 258). She became the ideal woman because she transcended the taint of Original Sin. Mary is a paradox for women in that she is a virgin and also a mother. She has attained "goodness" by being free from concupiscence and by bearing a child, which the Bible tells us will save woman. This creates an impossible situation for women. With the best intentions of goodness, a woman cannot be a virgin and a biological mother at the same time.

The focus on the Virgin Mary, especially within the Catholic Church, has created the image of the ideal woman — perfect and sexless. Since this is not possible physically, it must be achieved psychologically. This can be seen in the plight of women in the Victorian era. At this time, for a woman to be

---

"good" it was imperative that she feel no sexual desire. If a woman feels no passion or arousal, she can remain virginal, if not technically a virgin, no matter how many children she has. The sexuality distinctions of the Victorian era can be seen as a natural extension of the misogyny and fear of sex which were the catalyst for the formation of the doctrine of Original Sin. Christianity had for hundreds of years subjugated women because they were Eve and because they incited lust in men. So women became virgins. They became child wives who had no sexuality. They became the submissive receptacles of uncontrollable male lust. This "ideal woman" is psychologically a virgin even while she must submit to the sexual demands of her husband and bear his children (Armstrong, 1987, p. 86).

This is the ultimate capitulation of women in what was essentially a no win situation for them. To avoid being Eve, women became instead the Virgin Mary but in doing so, fell into the Lutheran marriage ideology which was to be Eve's punishment. In the Victorian home, the at last desexualised woman presided over the home, safe from the male world outside. Men and women moved in quite different spheres — men outside the home concerned with worldly matters relating to work and politics, women safely inside the home, concentrating on domestic and moral/spiritual matters. It is a bitter irony that women, in attempting to be what male dominated society wanted them to be, should be punished for so doing.

\* \* \*

Marriage and family today are still affected by the Christian doctrines which have shaped our past. Despite two waves of feminist movement this century, it is still a popularly held belief that a woman's place is in the home and she has no business being out in the male world of work and politics. Although it may seem ludicrous, it is still a notion popularly held by men in power that the unemployment problem would be solved if working wives gave up their jobs and went back to the home. While more and more women are in the workforce, the traditional ideals of our society, nevertheless, dictate that they must also perform all the 'womanly' duties within the home and family.

There is some residue of the extreme sexual repression of the Victorian era in our society today. There is still a sense that men desire sex more often than women and the double standard regarding sexuality is still in evidence. Men are allowed and, indeed, expected to be active sexually. A woman who enjoys indulging her sexual desires is seen, by men and women to be a 'slut' or a 'nymphomaniac' or, at the very least, a 'bimbo'. The 'child woman' of the

19th century became the 'nice girl' of the 20th. The sexuality of men and women cannot be seen apart from the society and culture which shapes it. It could be argued that 20th century society is no longer so tightly bound in religion and that the Church no longer has the influence over society that it had even one hundred years ago. This may be so, but the tradition of Western society has been grounded in Christianity for nearly 2000 years. Christianity has shaped our attitudes and our values to such a great extent and for such a long time that it is impossible to believe that we could have broken away from the influence so completely in only a century. The sexuality of women and the ways in which it is viewed by society as a whole are still influenced by the religious ideologies which shaped our past. Women in this century are still Eve and are still paying the price for her sin. ✓

✗ Today, a woman's sexuality is not her own. She is not free to express it however she likes. If she does, it may count against her. An example of this is if a woman is raped and she takes the case to court. Her previous sex life, the clothes she was wearing at the time of the alleged assault, her actions prior to the alleged assault, her previous relationships (if any) with her assailant and others are all called into question. It is her attire, her manner that incites the lust of her assailant. The court system does not consciously work according to the doctrine of Original Sin but there is certain evidence to suggest that society's internalisation of that doctrine influences its perception of justice.

It is not just the court system as this is only be a reflection of the society which created it. It is not only rape cases which appear to be biased against women in the court system. Cases of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination in the workplace are weighted against the women who bring them to court. Naomi Wolf documents a number of such cases. One in particular, that of Michelle Vinson in 1986, makes the point. Vinson, who was "young and beautiful and carefully dressed" had the court rule that her appearance counted against her, and that testimony about her "provocative" dress could be heard to decide whether her harassment was "welcome" (Wolf, 1986, p. 38).

The greatest, and perhaps saddest, impact on the sexuality of women of Christianity's prolonged attack is that we fear it as much as men. We are greatly intolerant of the sexuality of other women. Heterosexual women denigrate lesbian women for being 'unnatural'. Lesbian women deride heterosexual women for continuing sexual relations with men, the enemy. Adulterous women are soundly castigated. Women have been told so many lies about their sexuality over the last 2000 years that we are insecure in our

---



expression of it. We are still being told by magazines and 'experts' what we want but we are still afraid to say it for ourselves.

Most of the sex education we receive concerns biology and reproduction and bodily function, not how to give and receive pleasure. Our mothers never told us about masturbation or fantasies or ways of having sex. Christian ideology has robbed us of an erotic heritage. Men have controlled the sexuality of women for nearly 2000 years and they have had the full endorsement of the Church in this endeavour. Western neuroses about sex and women have been firmly planted in theology. Women have had to adapt the ways that they express their sexuality (or repress it) in line with the emotional needs of men.

Christianity has been making both men and women feel guilt and shame about their sexuality for hundreds of years but women have paid the higher price. Male sexuality has been constant during that time, it has always been rampant and uncontrollable and apparently still is today. Men have shown through the centuries that they are unable to take responsibility for their own sexuality — why else do they have to blame it on "concupiscence" and "uncontrollable lust". Women have had to be, throughout the centuries, either madonnas or whores — their whole existence is reliant on their sexual relationship to men. They have, at various time, had to be either sexually insatiable or totally frigid.

The Christian doctrine of Original Sin has told women that we are all Eve and therefore carry the guilt for the downfall of man within us. The Christian Church, in the way it has regarded and treated women, has contradicted its fundamental ideals of love and equality. Christian neuroses which are grounded in fear and hatred of sex have led to women being eternally punished because they are sexual beings who tempt men to confront their own dangerous sexuality.

Over 2000 years, the doctrine of Original Sin has been restated in official Christian ideology. It has been assimilated into social and political institutions. The 'nuclear family' of today still holds echoes of the 'restricted patriarchal nuclear' family devised in the 16th century. The court system today, as it regards offences against women, still holds echoes of Tertullian. Even though 20th century society is not so strictly bound by church theology, there are still underlying shades of it in our social values and beliefs.

## **References**

- Armstrong, K. (1986). **The Gospel according to woman. Christianity's creation of the sex war in the west.** London: Elm Tree.
- Barhouse, R.T. and Holmes, U.T. (Eds.). (1976). **Male and female: Christian approaches to sexuality.** New York: The Seabury Press.
- Crawford, P. (Ed.). (1983). **Exploring women's past: Essays in social history.** Melbourne: Sisters Publishing.
- Evans, M. J. (1983). **Woman in the Bible.** Exeter: Paternoster.
- Hagen, J. (Ed.). (1990). **Gender matters: Women's studies for the Christian community.** Michigan: Academie Books
- Heine, S. (1987). **Women and early Christianity: Are the feminist scholars right?** London: SCM.
- Ormerod, N. (1992). **Grace and disgrace: A theology of self esteem, society and history.** Sydney: E.J. Dwyer
- Pomeroy, S.B. (1975). **Goddesses, whores, wives and slaves. Women in classical antiquity.** New York: Schocken Books.
- Rover, C. (1970). **Love, morals and the feminists.** London: Butler and Tanner.
- Russell, L.M. (1974). **Human liberation in a feminist perspective: A theology.** Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Storkey, E. (1985). **What's right with feminism.** London: SPCK.
- Taylor, G. (1959). **Sex in history.** Norwich: Jarrold & Sons.
- The Holy Bible. King James Version.** (containing the Old and the New Testaments).
- Vuuren, N. van (1973). **The subversion of women as practised by churches, witch hunters and other sexists.** Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

Warnicke, R.M. (1983). **Women of the English Renaissance and Reformation.** Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

Wolfe, N. (1990). **The beauty myth.** London: Vintage.

<sup>1</sup> A Latin version of the Bible was the first book to be produced by the process of movable-type print in the 15th century.

<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, who lived in the Roman Empire in the 5th century, had a powerful influence on the shape and structure of the Catholic Church.

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian (c.160-200 AD). A leader within the early Christian Church.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther (1483?-1546). Leader of the German Reformation.

---

## Essay Two: Legal Ideology: Feminist Excavations.

Emma Mills

*Another ideological influence on women and their lives and roles within the family is the law. The first wave feminists commenced the struggle to change the legal system and provide an equity between women and men before the law. Emma Mills details this struggle and brings the debate up to date by outlining where the feminist jurisprudence discourse is now leading.*

...that which was law to the generation of yesterday, is not law to us; and that which is law to us, may be reversed for the generation of tomorrow... (Caroline Norton, 1854, p. 6)

Law is delivered to the world as rational, objective and fair — an efficient, rigorous and intellectual system established for resolving social conflict. A key concept in traditional legal theory is that law's task is to seek truth and present "the facts", divorced from any systems of belief, morals and politics. Similarly, the law's representatives, those who interpret and apply the law, are also seen as impartial and neutral. Social and cultural values are set aside and individuals are treated in an unbiased fashion regardless of ethnicity, class or gender (Naffine, 1990).

Before discovering feminism, specifically, feminist legal theory, my views about the law were in agreement with the picture presented above. I knew the law could be unjust, but I remained unaware that the law devalues or ignores and, thus, oppresses categories of the population which are defined by race, class or gender. Feminism has challenged my ideas about the law, and in turn, I now wish to challenge the notion of the law's objectivity and neutrality and argue that the law plays a vital role in not only maintaining but perpetuating the oppression of women. To do this, I will present an historical and theoretical overview of feminists' resistance and challenges to the law, much of which will focus on the family.

Feminist challenges to the law throughout history are a vital component to this argument for several reasons. The contribution that previous women can make to our current ideas is invaluable as today we face so many similar problems of goals and principles that earlier feminists were fighting for. We are still engaged with struggles with governments and traditionalists (those who resist change and want to maintain existing power relationships), whose arguments are as powerful and influential today as they were two hundred years ago. Also, the wide differences in opinions and beliefs amongst the

earlier feminists suggest that the women's movement has never been totally unified so we need not fear today that an emergence of divisions in feminism will herald its demise.

Finally, this understanding of history may provide us with guidance, confirmation and aspiration to build upon our achievements and learn from our failures (Brophy and Smart, 1985). Our current criticism of the law can be traced back to much earlier times. I will be focusing on nineteenth century England<sup>1</sup> as it is possible to argue that this era produced the earliest women's movement, and the primary focus of this movement was the law.

\* \* \*

Early women's rights advocates began their activism by questioning women's secondary position in society. These Victorian feminists believed this position was due to a mistake or an oversight which, because of ignorance and custom, had been carried on through history (Ryan, 1992). It has been suggested that the women's movement was part of the broad sweep of liberal and progressive reform that was transforming society, emerging out of the anti-slave movement and the fight for emancipation. A central feature of the enlightenment period was the liberal attack on traditional prejudices and injustice and the protest made by the women's movement at the confinement and injustices faced by women were part of this attack. This critique of women's confinement, along with the demands for the establishment of a new public role represented not only the core of the women's movement, but its form and its organisation around campaigns for legal, political and social reform (Caine, 1992).

Perhaps our perceptions of these early challenges to the legal and political systems focus on the suffragettes and their conflicts and struggles to win the vote for women. However, feminists were also fighting within the public sphere for custody rights, married women's rights and in the areas of sexuality and reproduction. Divisions emerged on issues such as equality as opposed to special treatment, women's financial dependence on men, and strategies to adopt to achieve these differently defined goals (Brophy and Smart, 1985). I will be examining two areas of concern during this time, mothers and children and the family.

Caroline Norton<sup>2</sup> (1808-1877) was probably the first woman to raise publicly the issue of married women's lack of legal rights as mothers. Historically, fathers had absolute rights to the guardianship of the child irrespective of the mothers' wishes (Graycar, 1990). Norton was denied any

access to her children after separating from her husband and used her literary skills and prominent connections to publicise the powerlessness of mothers (Norton, 1854). In one pamphlet, she revealed in detail her personal grief and anguish in the hope that the law would be amended. Norton based her argument on an idealised notion of the mother-child relationship and while she did seem overtly feminist, she emphasises that she is not writing in "an act of rebellion" (sic), or attempting to "claim equality with men." It is quite possible though that this was a deliberate act on Norton's behalf to ensure a wide audience for her writing: her focus on her personal experiences as a woman and her analyses of the law as being unjust and ineffective for women are qualities that feminists have endorsed and extended upon. Thus, I feel no need to criticise Norton's crusade and personally admire her for questioning and resisting the nineteenth century legal structure which was so explicitly patriarchal in its nature.

Norton's campaign led to two Bills being introduced into the House of Lords. The second Bill became the 1839 *Custody of Infants Act*. This was indeed a shift in the father's absolute rights but it merely provided the courts, not women, with powers over the custody of children if it saw fit to use them. Therefore, this did little to provide women with rights as women or equal rights as mothers within marriage. Several issues around this point need to be made before proceeding.

Firstly, the law of absolute father's rights and the fierce resistance to changing this right, enabled men to maintain control over women as rearers of children. Drawing this analysis through to the present day, we still find that the law encourages this control over women. For example, working mothers and lesbian mothers have lost custody cases because they have not conformed to idealised notions of motherhood. This is an extremely important point. Once women gained the right to apply for custody of children, the courts began to elevate the status of motherhood into a sacred virtue, one which reflected biological essentialism (Graycar and Morgan, 1990). Entrenched in this assumption is the legal view of the good and of the bad woman. The good woman is loyal and loving, a faithful wife and mother whose sphere is in the home. The law, in turn, rewards the good woman and punishes the bad woman. Deviants to the established legal "norm" — such as lesbians and working mothers — are those who are punished (Naffine, 1990).

It has now become clear to me that although women gained the right to apply for custody of their children, the control and power men asserted over these mothers is still with us because the institution of the law still

continues to support and maintain the patriarchal state. Though some women have benefited from the belief that women make more natural and therefore better parents, such attitudes have served to constrain and control women and to punish those who do not confirm to the patriarchal ideology.

The strong resistance to the demands of equal rights over children is an indication of the strong antipathy to allowing the law inside the very private sphere of the family. Feminists such as Frances Power Cobbe<sup>3</sup>, who was active during the 1860s, identified the family as the key area where women were most denied their rights and criticised the law for legitimising theft and violence: theft in regard to property rights of a woman and violence because the law ignored and even condoned wife abuse (Brophy and Smart, 1985).

Marriage in the nineteenth century ensured a woman's "civil death" and loss of total economic autonomy. Her property became her husbands at the moment of marriage; any wages she received for work outside the home belonged to her husband; and the husband had total authority within the confines of the family. To put it simply, in the eyes of the law, married women did not exist or were considered to be part of the husband (Weisberg, 1982). Wife beating was also acceptable and widespread. In common law, the husband was said to have the legal right to beat his wife. The expression "rule of thumb" is thought to have derived from the belief that he could only use a stick the thickness of his thumb (Freeman, 1984).

The struggles and campaigns to establish women's rights within the sphere of the family, especially in relation to property and violence, occurred almost simultaneously. Brophy and Smart (1985) have given an account of these two campaigns and their results. The campaign on property began in 1855 when the Married Women's Property Committee (MWPC) was formed. However, it was not until 1882 that the MWPC succeeded in pushing a more reasonable property Act through the British Parliament. This Act allowed women to retain their own separate property on marriage and again represented a real gain for women. Yet, it did nothing to challenge the existing imbalance between men and women in terms of women's restricted ability to acquire property. As a consequence, feminists in the later nineteenth century were more concerned about re-distribution of property and income between men and women rather than the establishment of individual rights to ownership which seemed to effect only a few wealthy women. The campaign against wife beating also produced legislation in the form of the 1878 *Matrimonial Causes Act*. This assisted in eradicating the notion that a wife was the property of her husband but in practical terms, did little to help battered women.

Women had to first be successful in gaining a conviction of assault against their husbands before they could apply for permission to live apart from them. It is important to note, however, that if we consider the relative powerlessness of married women during this period, the campaign was successful in that it provided some relief to sorely oppressed women.

It has become clear to me that the law has played an important role in determining and maintaining the structure of the family. First, the legitimization of theft and violence prior to feminist challenges suggested that the law assisted in establishing, and then promoting, the ideal traditional family. This consisted of a male breadwinner and economically dependent wife and mother enclosed in a private domain where domestic violence is permitted. Second, I would argue that the law maintained the structure of the family by only offering women ineffective and unsatisfactory laws which did nothing to change the view of women as being economic and social subordinates. Strong family values survived the first wave feminist attack. How devastating it must have been for some feminists who placed their entire faith in the legal system, who believed that the law had finally championed their cause, only to discover later that nothing really had changed.

By discussing first wave feminist challenges and resistance to law, I hope I have highlighted some conflicts and struggles women faced, struggles which were less prominent yet equally as important as the much written about suffrage movement. Our idea that the Women's Movement was concerned primarily, even exclusively, with gaining access to the public sphere has given way to an ever-increasing recognition of the extent of Victorian feminists' concern with the oppression of women in domestic life, in marriage and in all forms of sexual relations. In this paper, I have also highlighted that the resulting laws, introduced to combat these issues, were ineffective and unsatisfactory as women remained oppressed. However, I suggest that to view this early feminist work as fatally flawed or too short sighted would be a mistake. The contribution made by our foremothers was strong, courageous and represented the first real challenge to the male dominance of legal and political institutions as well as to discriminatory legislation. Victorian feminists contributed to the foundation layer of the Women's Movement — a movement which, because of its strong roots, has survived.

\* \* \*

Bringing this argument up to the present day, we can still find that laws, once passed, are ineffective and unsatisfactory and traditional family values remain and continue to be sustained. For example, in the 1970s, as a result of



the second wave feminist movement, laws designed to provide remedies for battered wives were introduced. While representing a real gain for women in theory in practice, there was little change in the position of battered women. This was because of several reasons including the fact that non-compliant police made it difficult for women to proceed against violent husbands and a conservative judiciary imposed restrictive interpretations on the legislation, further limiting its value (Naffine, 1990).

Another example of the law's ineffectiveness is the Equal Employment Opportunity Act (EEO), introduced in Western Australia in 1984. The fact that it became unlawful to discriminate on the grounds of sex, marital status and pregnancy in areas such as work and education also represented a real gain for women. However, despite the legislation, the concentration of women is still in a narrow range of industries, in medium to lower skill levels, in a narrow range of skill specialisations, as well as their lower earnings than men (Townshend-Smith, 1989). It seems that the law has not only failed to provide a remedy that earlier feminists were fighting for but in many respects, it has upheld it. As a consequence, the notion of the traditional family and its values has been maintained.

More recently, there has been a proliferation of feminist legal writing or feminist jurisprudence. Naffine (1990) divides feminist legal literature addressed to the law into three approaches. With each new approach comes a new phase, a new understanding of the relationship between the law and masculinity. This new phase is built upon the findings of earlier feminist thinkers. The first approach is described as "first phase feminism" which emerged in the early 1970s as part of a resurgence of feminism. The rebirth of the Women's Movement can be traced to the family centred years of the 1950s which re-established women's place in the home after their move into paid employment during World War II. Women began to question the lack of options they had in their lives and as a result, in the late 1960s, a new activist Women's Movement gained momentum, commencing in the United States and gradually moving to all Western countries (Ryan, 1992).

This "first phase" feminism undertaken in the 1970s represents the largest body of feminist work on the law and concentrates on the pursuit of formal equality for women. Its goal has been the removal of legal constraints on women and the demand for equal rights to allow women to compete in the public sphere. Possibly the most important feature of the first phase is its tendency to accept the law as being essentially rational, objective and fair. In the writings of this phase it is argued that the primary reason that the law is

still unsatisfactory for women is because it has not yet developed full and effective rights for women. This, it is argued, is due to the male monopoly within the law — the men of the law have been deliberately biased against women to preserve their own power and to keep women in their place.

My main criticism of this first phase of feminist jurisprudence is that its goals of equal rights and the removal of legal constraints have benefited only a few women. The examples of the domestic violence and equal employment legislation that I discussed earlier clearly highlight this fact. Furthermore, the introduction of these and similar legislations may have actually worked against women, as there is now a persistent and powerful myth that we are "equal" to men in the eyes of the law and thus "equal" to men in our everyday lives—in the workforce, the family, education and politics. Clearly, introducing a piece of legislation does very little to remove the patriarchal ideology that is so deeply embedded in our society.

The second phase feminists, writing during the 1980s, argued that the claim of impartiality and fairness within the law were merely principles employed by legal men as a protective cover. In actual fact, men have fashioned a legal system in their own image with their own view of the world. Quite naturally then, the law advantages the male and devalues or ignores the female. For example, Mackinnon (1982) criticises the law in its maintenance of the sexual oppression of women. She argues that the law sees and treats women the way men see and treat women and as a result, this androcentric viewpoint ensures male control over the bodies of women. In this way, rape laws are centred around men's perspectives and are intent on preserving men's rights over female sexuality (Naffine, 1990). Highlighting this is the rule of "prompt complaint". This states that if a woman does not complain promptly about being raped, her story is highly likely to be fabricated. This view does not take into account that thousands of women, through fear, self-blame and shame, may not talk about their trauma until months or even years after the event (Scutt, 1990). Second phase feminists argue that there is little point in seeking to improve women's position within this masculine legal framework; what is needed is social revolution, not just reform.

Third phase feminists have expanded upon the works of the first and second phase writers and Naffine (1990) provides a detailed account of their theory. They have resisted the notion that the law represents male interests in anything like a coordinated or uniform fashion (as the second phase writers claim) because the law is not the rational and objective body of doctrine it professes to be. In fact, it merely reflects the priorities of the dominant

patriarchal social order, a social order that is complex and contradictory. The fact that one can find moments in legal history when the law has benefited women highlights the uneven nature of the law: male interests have not always been top priority. Furthermore, the androcentric theory tends to leave out class. The law appears to favour men very selectively often to the disadvantage of working class men. Naffine discusses in detail the writings of a prominent feminist of the third phase, Carol Smart.<sup>4</sup> Smart has concentrated on family law and observes a substantial improvement in the law's approach to women. She argues that there persists in the law a view of women as economic and social subordinates to men. The law has been an agent of social reform for women but it still helps to keep us in our place. The law helps as well as hinders women.

An analysis of these three phases is crucial to an understanding of where feminist legal thinking stands today. The debate has progressed a great deal since the early 1970s and to this extent I believe that the first phase feminist arguments are no longer applicable to me. I align myself more with the second phase feminists for a number of reasons. First, I disagree with third phase critiques in their analyses of the law benefiting women as well as hindering them. It seems to me that whenever women really gain something of value, a huge backlash occurs. Women gaining in one area usually end up losing in another equally important area. The idea of a legal androcentric viewpoint really holds true for me. Our whole construction of our world is from this single perspective and the law is no exception. Introducing laws that represent a gain for women really only perpetuates the myth that women are starting to be considered and even valued. What I do agree with, however, is that the interrelatedness of class, sex and race must be considered. To this extent, I believe the law represents a white, upper class, male point of view!

\* \* \*

The important question now is — where to from here? This issue could be discussed in an entire essay but I have chosen to look at the second phase feminist "solutions". Implicit in their argument is a suggestion that women would do things better, offering a new vision of the world from the perspective of women. Female qualities could form the basis of a more desirable system, including a legal system. The female approach would be authentic; it would reflect the real nature of relations between people and would reject the male mode which sees the social world in terms of the abstract competing claims of identical individuals. This new legal approach — an approach of communality rather than competition — would be in harmony with the lives and, thus, the culture of women (Naffine, 1990). This concept appeals to me

greatly although I am sure that the idea of being class, gender and racially conscious would not be easy to achieve. In the meantime, as the law is obviously here to stay, it concerns me that the law is actually more inclined to support me as I am not part of an ethnic minority, or poor, or have a disability...I feel both guilty and helpless about this.

## **References**

- Brophy, J. and Smart, C. (Eds.). (1985). **Women-in-law: Explorations in law, family and sexuality**. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Caine, B. (1992). **Victorian feminists**. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Graycar, R. (Ed.). (1990). **Dissenting opinions: Feminist explorations in law and society**. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Freeman, M. (Ed.). (1984). **State, law and the family: Critical perspectives**. New York: Tavistock Publications.
- Naffine, N. (1990). **Law and the sexes. Explorations in feminist jurisprudence**. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.
- Norton, C. (1854). **English laws for women**. Connecticut: Hyperion Press.
- Ryan, B. (1992). **Feminism and the women's movement. Dynamics of change in social movement, ideology and activism**. New York: Routledge
- Scutt, J. (1990). **Women and the law: Commentary and materials: Law, practice and policy**. Sydney: The Law Book Company.
- Townshend-Smith, R. (1989). **Sex discrimination in employment: Law, practice and policy**. London: Sweet & Maxwell.

- <sup>1</sup> Similar processes were occurring in the United States.
- <sup>2</sup> Caroline Norton (1808-1877). An Englishwoman whose own personal experience with the legal system led her to become an activist and writer.
- <sup>3</sup> Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904). Irish born writer and social activist involved in many areas of rights for women and author in 1868 of a pamphlet entitled **Criminals, Idiots, Women and Minors. Is this Classification Sound?**
- <sup>4</sup> Carol Smart has written and contributed to a number of books in this area, including **Feminism and the Power of Law** (1989). London: Routledge.

---

## **Essay Three: The Creation of Gynaecology: A Heavenly Benefaction or a Hellish Affliction?**

### **A Retrospective View of Gynaecology.      Ann Eames**

---

*Ideology permeates every aspect of our society and in this thought provoking paper, Ann Eames argues that the modern medical profession can be linked to the recent historical past when radical surgery was seen as a response to women's sexuality.*

In this critique I will be examining the 'creation' of gynaecology in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century and its effect upon women of the era. While researching literature for this analysis, I came across substantial evidence of many atrocities performed on women in the name of the advancing of, and the financial rewarding of, the advent of gynaecology. My findings raised within me an extremely irate response towards the founding fathers of this field. This primarily motivated me to initially adopt a radical feminist stance for this paper and suspend my accustomed socialist feminist perspective.

My reaction caused an internal dilemma for me as I do not easily align myself with radical feminist ideologies. I disagree with the radical feminist aspiration to appropriate biological technology for human reproduction as the means to liberate women from the shackles of motherhood (Hyde, 1991, p. 64) and to eliminate the need for male participation in the act of conception. I regard their goal of constructing an alternative matriarchal society devoid of half the human populace, males, to be unrealistic. To me this concept is as full of prejudices and inequalities as is the patriarchal system. I believe females and males should share equal input in public and private spheres and, to achieve this, societal institutions need to change. Issues of oppression need to be examined in historical contexts to glean the basis of female oppression and to understand where changes need to be implemented.

To clarify my deliberation, I read radical feminist Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology* after which I concluded that a radical feminist position would not accomplish my objectives nor express my genuine opinions. Whilst I concur with some basic points scattered throughout Daly's book, I find her viewpoint to be too extreme, wide sweeping and emotive. One should exercise caution within this particular criticism and not view gynaecologists as a conglomerate mass, whose "intent and purpose" was/is one and the same. In keeping with socialist feminist beliefs (Sapiro, 1986, p. 443), I maintain that the history of gynaecology, and its effects upon women, needs to be placed within the social

---

contexts of the time and the social beliefs, mores, institutional structures and ideologies of the era. It should not be judged by persons in the late twentieth century using twentieth century ideals.

I have therefore decided to maintain a socialist feminist perspective, one which argues that the state is the major oppressor of woman as it possesses the power, via policy and legislation, to reinforce the ideologies of the era and contributes enormously to ensure female oppression. This view argues that the family is a "microcosm of the state", and the male dominated institution of marriage maintains the social order.

Daly (1988) delineates the advent of gynaecology at the turn of the nineteenth century as a direct reaction to the escalation of first wave feminism. She maintains "the purpose and intent of gynaecology was/is not healing in a deep sense but violent enforcement of the sexual caste system" (p. 227). Gynaecology, according to Daly's theory, was a deliberate patriarchal stratagem to quell women's rebellion by surgical control implemented through master-minded "mutilations and mutations" (p. 226). She asserts gynaecologists are guilty of Nazi types of medical procedures (p. 293-311), possessing "witch-crazed" attitudes (p. 229), and performing "sado-rituals" (p. 229) in a holy self-righteous stance to maintain the phallogocentric status quo. I contend, however, that attacking gynaecologists is too simplistic in perception and recognise that first, this specialised field needs to be allotted into its rightful era, and second, the place women held in society at the time needs to be scrutinised. My research has revealed that factors affecting women's position depend on the interplay of many different societal structures and the principles put forth by these institutions, as well as on the class and race into which a woman is born.

\* \* \*

Gynaecology was a product of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a time when the magic and superstition of the Medieval and Renaissance periods changed and the Age of Enlightenment championed science in its many forms (Haeger, 1988). Ann Dally (1991, p. xxiii) accurately sees the Age of Enlightenment as not being "enlightened in its attitudes towards women" and in fact this era is one of the most oppressive to women. This period was greatly influenced by the philosopher, Rousseau,<sup>1</sup> who argued that women's role in life as wife and mother was natural and fundamental; women exist only for the pleasure of men; that they are the guardians of morals in the home; and that they should submit to men, who are the absolute rulers of the domestic sphere (Figes, 1970).

This shift in the dominant paradigm saw institutions adopt a positivist perspective. Science was attached to all forms of social phenomena in an objective and detached manner, including the areas of medicine (Landis, 1989, p. 439). Iatrophysics and iatrochemistry helped reinforce the paradigm, the former perceiving the body as a machine conforming to the laws of mathematics and statistics, the latter believing that chemical balances govern life's processes (Haeger, 1988, p. 129). As religion and superstition lost their power and a belief in the afterlife and its glory lost some significance, individuals instead began to desire longer lives and were ready to submit themselves into the hands of scientists in efforts to achieve their goal. The catchword of the scientist became 'experimentation' and living creatures who were the focus of investigation became known as 'guinea pigs'. Adapting this new scientific logic to the forum of gynaecology where women were the focus, my research reveals there is no doubt that they and their bodies became the 'guinea pigs' for empirical analysis.

\* \* \*

Psychological connections of women to their female organs is an age-old concept reaching back almost two thousand years. In the fourth and fifth century BC, Hippocrates (the father of medicine), postulated that women's reproductive organs were the origin of hysteria and/or insanity (Mendelsohn, 1989). From the mid-nineteenth century, ovariectomies, clitoridectomies and hysterectomies were performed often indiscriminately on women who failed to conform to the patriarchal status quo:

[t]hey tell us that castration pays; that patients are improved, some of them cured; that the moral sense of the patient is elevated, that she becomes tractable, orderly, industrious, and cleanly (Gilliam, 1896, cited in Mendelsohn, 1981, p. 30-31).

The main exponent of clitoridectomies was one of Britain's most skilled surgeons, Isaac Baker Brown, who opened a clinic in 1858 specifically to perform these procedures. In 1866 he published a book, *The Curability of Certain Forms of Insanity, Epilepsy, Catalepsy and Hysteria in Females*, citing clitoridectomies as the cure. He was supported by many well known physicians and girls as young as ten were put into his hands. The Church applauded Baker Brown in his quest to suppress the moral turpitude of women and articles were printed in the sectarian publications of the time encouraging the operation. Baker Brown's book and practices were eventually challenged, resulting in him being expelled from the Obstetric Society



and resigning from the Medical Society of London. However, he then sailed for America, where he had many followers (Dally, 1991).

The Church support of Baker Brown's conduct may at first seem in conflict with Christian compassion but when one places this institution into the time frame and understands the religious ideologies about women and their place in the family and society, the clergy's stance is clarified. Sexuality was to be kept within the confines of marriage, which together with motherhood, was a God-given vocation sanctified by the church and the state (Figs, 1970). From the Church's point of view sexual surgery on women provided a legitimate method to control female sexuality and, thus, to assist in the fight against female assault upon male morals.

The scientific fraternity was further assisted in underpinning women's lesser status in society at this time by the adaptation and selective implementation of Charles Darwin's<sup>2</sup> hypotheses. These were taken to scientifically prove that Anglo-Saxon, middle-upper class, educated males are the epitome of civilisation. While men were intellectually and technically superior, women possessed characteristics similar to the "primitive races", inferior but possessing "good" qualities, and located marginally higher on the evolutionary scale than animals (Figs, 1970, p. 114-115).

I hold the influence of Darwin's theory as responsible for many agonising surgical procedures being performed on women without anaesthetics. Nitrous oxide (laughing gas) was discovered in 1770 and ether in 1818 but they were not employed in surgery on women until the mid-nineteenth century. The patriarchal ideology of the time endorsed Darwin's assumption which Silas Weir Mitchell, a prominent nineteenth century physician, conceptualises when he equates the rise in pain sensitivity first, to the abandonment of the rack for torture and second, to the place one holds on the scale of evolution:

The savage does not feel pain as we do: nor as we examine the descending scale of life do animals seem to have the acuteness of pain-sense at which we have arrived (cited in Dally, 1991, p. 4, 5).

The "we" in this statement is, of course, the ideal, educated man of the times. One may assume from this that as women were believed to be on the lower evolutionary scale, they possessed a higher pain threshold and thus were not in need of anaesthetics.

Hierarchy is the key component of a patriarchal system (Sapiro, 1986, p. 446). It permeates all societal institutions and the class, gender and race divisions of civilisation. Using the androcentric ideologies of the era, women are secondary in gender separation; Anglo-Saxon women are superior to non-white races; and class divides women into a hierarchy of upper/middle, working and poor distinctions. Women of the upper and middle class were confined to the home, partaking in "lady-like" activities and leading sedentary lives, their idleness being seen as a status symbol. These women were believed to be far more delicate than the lower classes and therefore subject to more ailments caused by the female organs. Working class women were forced to work for financial reasons in factories or as domestic servants. They were seen as unclean carriers of disease and infection and it was the working women's "lot" to bear up to life's afflictions and serve the upper classes (Delamont, 1980; Dally, 1991).

Psychology, the new science of the mind, was gathering momentum. One of the founding fathers of psychology was Freud<sup>3</sup> whose scientific, psychological theories authenticated female inferiority and who hypothesised human behaviour to be rooted in the unconscious and the anatomy. Freud ignored all other influences and saw the male reproductive organs as superior to the female's (Hyde, 1991). He used men as the measuring-stick of normality while women were labelled the deviant "other", chained to their shameful basic instincts (Figes, 1970). Freud's influence was insidious: his psychoanalytical theories were taken up by the scientific and medical fraternity and manipulated to infiltrate the female psyche. This indoctrination was so successful that the majority of women internalised and accepted male superiority and acquiesced to patriarchal pressure, many complying to psychosurgery in efforts to curb their "shameful" instincts and urges. This gave the patriarchal society a powerful weapon to control female sexuality.

The view of the poor during this era is summed up by Freud, who not surprisingly saw them as an absolute polarisation of the upper classes, as being an uninhibited rabble, "Thick skinned...easy going...less feeling", "Helpless" and "targets" for "epidemics, sicknesses and evils of social institutions" (Figes, 1970, p. 137). Bearing these hypotheses in mind, the lowest and most powerless form of womanhood would be poor, non-white and so inferior on the hierarchal scale that she is forced to work in bondage and be treated like an animal or a slave. My research shows that these demarcations between women had a marked effect upon them and the part they had to play in gynaecological experiments and the manipulation of women through

surgical social control. The poorer class of women, including black American slaves, supplied an endless source of subject material to increase surgeon's skills.

From the late eighteenth century men had begun to penetrate many of the traditional healing and caring roles in society, such as midwifery, and slowly began to turn age-old skills into a scientific specialty. The British medical profession established "new obstetrics" and rapidly usurped female midwives. Using campaigns embracing promises of fast deliveries, scientific technology and inventions of new or improved instruments, such as forceps, they were able to convince upper and middle class women of superior and safer services and swiftly attained a fashionable status amongst these classes (Donegan, 1978; Haeger, 1988). Interestingly, in an ironical class dichotomy, the wealthier women also became material for experimentation as they possessed the wherewithal to pay the high fees and thus they evolved to become the "bread and butter" for gynaecologists.

Women's role in female health care changed its profile as women were denied the traditional ministrations by female healers because they were seen to be lacking in educated, scientific knowledge. The exclusion of women in medicine was determined by implementing two strategies: promoting the need for practitioners to be educated in credible training institutions; and excluding women from those institutions (Donegan, 1978). The power of the State legislated to discriminate in favour of male dominance in education, fortified by additional scientific doctrine in the "energy concept".<sup>4</sup> The theory was taken up and rewritten to suit the purpose of many scientific men to ensure they remained free from female interference in occupations which had become the unique domain of men (Dally, 1991, p. 38, 39).

\* \* \*

Britain led the way in most forms of general surgery but America is recognised as the founding nation of gynaecology. The dubious honour of "Father of Gynaecology" goes to Dr. J. Marion Sims (1813-1883) and critiques of this scientific man range from adulation to charges of misogyny and being the instigator of medical atrocities to control women socially and genetically.<sup>5</sup> Criticisms of Sims come from many arenas, particularly from feminist analysts. Many pro-feminist accounts of Sims are scathing, such as that of Mary Daly (1988, p. 225) who sees "sexual surgery" as a means for male restraint of women. She believes that Sims was a "monomaniacal and ambitious" man who, by his own confession, hated and abhorred female organs and used the

bodies of black female slaves and charity patients of the New York Women's Hospital to advance himself in the medical arena. He sustained a comfortable existence for himself and accumulated knowledge through practice on both poor and wealthy women.<sup>6</sup>

Robert Mendelsohn (1981, p. 33-34) writes that despite Sims gaining the titles of "Father of Gynaecology" and "Architect of the Vagina" for his success in the closure of vesico-vaginal fistulas, he may have been prompted by less than honourable intentions. Sims actually used the word "experiment" in keeping with medical research terminology of the period (Dally, 1991, p. 22). He lent legitimacy through his surgical successes to open the floodgate on a specialised field of medicine focused entirely on women. In this role, women were reduced to become "essentially and exclusively patients" (Dally, 1991, p. xvi).

Once anaesthetics were introduced, surgeons had "carte blanche" to invade women's abdomens more freely, increasing their own anatomical knowledge and skills in the process. In the field of bacteriology, many new discoveries in asepsis were introduced and so levels of hygiene were increasing; surgeons began to wear surgical gowns and gloves, instead of "street clothing", and chemicals were being used to disinfect hospital areas. The implementation of aseptic routine lowered infection and raised the successes of surgical procedures. Many gynaecologists were content to disregard the hygienics explanation for some of the advances in surgical success and took all the credit for themselves. Scientists, and particularly physicians and surgeons, enjoyed a rapid elevation in public opinion, becoming revered as "God-like" (Phillips and Rakuseen, 1989, p. 607).

Being the leaders in a new dominion, the founding fathers were able to write their own hagiographies, with themselves as the heroes, owning an "almost magic wand" to rescue women from the imprisonment of nature (Dally, 1991, p. xvii). They saw themselves as godly, gallant liberators of women whereas I believe that they were securing control of women by nature, to control of women by men of science. The medical fraternity internalised their divine reflection penning mutual megalomaniacal testaments:

If, like all human beings, he is made in the image of the Almighty, and if he is kind, then his kindness and concern for his patient may provide her with a glimpse of God (Scott, cited in Mendelsohn, 1981, p. 21).

In their supreme glory, some of these surgeons took on deific judgments, performing acts of social engineering, sterilising poor women, white or black, in charity hospitals. These practitioners gained government sanction by saving the welfare state unnecessary economic output to "undesirable" elements of society. In the American south, so many hysterectomies were performed in charity hospitals on black women that they earned the title of "Mississippi Appendectomies" (Mendelsohn, 1981, p. 104-105). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a revered Scottish surgeon reflected the supreme status of gynaecologists when he professed to see no impediment to women being "spayed" like any other animal. Robert Battye, a celebrated American Southern gynaecologist advocated the "castration" and "spaying" of women so vociferously that the process became known as "Battye's Operation" and was responsible for thousands of women in America and England being subjected to "castration". Eugenics through sterilisation was rife to curb reproduction of perceived unsuitable members of the human race who displayed traits other than the mentally, physically and ethnically desired beings. William Goodell propounded sterilisation to prevent birth of "insane progeny" and as "sound political economy to stamp out insanity" (Dally, 1991, p. 150-156). What the patriarchs of this era perceived as insanity would have been a moot point, open to debate and adaptable to any circumstance in order to execute social and genetic control of women.

My retrospection of gynaecology convinces me that women were subject to atrocities in the name of science. Legitimacy was conferred through the reinforcement and underpinning given by the symbiotic relationship with other branches of science, the church and the state. It stunned me to realise that such events took place only one hundred years ago or less. Today we consider ourselves to be much more compassionate, less oppressive and more enlightened, but are we? There has been an increase of women into medical studies but the profession still remains typically gendered, masculine in ideology, in which women, both practitioners and consumers, are still marginalised. Women are seen to be the primary victims of the medical profession, "plaintive, angry...desperate...mentally, emotionally and physically disfigured by the very doctors they thought they could trust" (Mendelsohn, 1981, p. x).

This patriarchal institution still places women in danger today through iatrogenic injury or illness by withholding birth control; misdiagnosis; experimentation with drugs or surgery; and unnecessary procedures (Rowland, 1989). As recently as the 1960s and 1970s, gynaecologists were promoting hysterectomies in the name of public health after the birth of the last planned

child. This is thought provoking, and may actually clarify the reality behind the rhetoric. To me this approach makes about as much sense as recommending men lop off their heads to avoid headaches or brain tumours. Such recommendations issuing from the mouths of eminent physicians is horrifying as many easily influenced colleagues may follow suit without question, thus influencing incalculable numbers of female patients.

Many gynaecologists, are still "playing God", by performing "love surgery" — redesigning "faulty" female anatomy, sometimes without permission — during other procedures (Rowland, 1989, p. 39). Could this heinous operation have stemmed from male failure to satisfy women sexually and divine arrogance that led them to believe the fault is found in female anatomy? "Hip pocket hysterectomies" are also ad hoc income boosts for unscrupulous gynaecologists, who recommend and perform unnecessary surgery (Mendelsohn, 1981, p. 220). I concur with Mendelsohn (1981, p. 194-195) that the medico/political leadership and structure needs to be reviewed before women can emerge from oppression and marginalisation within the medical institution. Women need to become better informed through consciousness raising activities and consolidate to become empowered and force changes within the medical institution. Many physicians need to take a fresh look at their ethics, integrity, motives, morals, compassion, the influences of drug companies and doctor's fees.

Through my analysis of retrospective and current gynaecology and through linking it to radical feminist ideology, I realised that today's medical scientists share a goal with radical feminists. Both are aiming for discovery of a method to reproduce the human species without human sexual participation. It alarms me that these women could be inadvertently legitimising and fuelling further experimentation on women as scientists work under the guise of assisting women's liberation.

## References

- Dally, A. (1991). *Women under the knife: A history of surgery*. London: Hutchinson Radius.
- Daly, M. (1979). *Gyn/Ecology: The metaethics of radical feminism*. London: Women's Press.
-

- Delamont, S. (1980). **The sociology of women: An introduction.** London: Allen and Unwin.
- Donegan, J.B. (1978). **Women and men midwives: Medicine, morality and misogyny in early America.** Connecticut: Greenwood Press.
- Figes, E. (1986). **Patriarchal attitudes: Women in society.** London: Faber and Faber.
- Haeger, K. (1988). **The illustrated history of surgery.** London: Harold Starke.
- Hyde, J.S. (1991). **Half the human experience: The psychology of women.** (4th Edition.) Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Company.
- Mendelsohn, R. (1981). **Mal(e) practice: How doctors manipulate women.** Chicago: Contemporary Books.
- Phillips, A. and Rakusen, J. (1989). **The new our bodies, ourselves: A health book by and for women.** Auckland: Penguin.
- Rowland, R. (1989). **Woman herself: A transdisciplinary perspective on women's identity.** Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Sapiro, V. (1986). **Women in American society.** California: Mayfield.

- 1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). A Swiss-born French political and social theorist who many credit as the "father" of the French Revolution and whose writings include *Social Contract* and *Emile*, an analysis of why education for women should be different to that of men and how women should be educated to be men's moral guardians.
- 2 Charles Darwin (1809-1882). English naturalist whose theory of natural selection gave a revolutionary account of the origins of biological diversity.
- 3 Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Austrian doctor and psychoanalyst responsible for the development of a theory of the mind, whose writings have had a major influence on the psychology and psychiatry professions.
- 4 According to this theory, "energy" could be displaced from organ to organ. This was linked to the ideologies of the era in which the primary reason for women's existence was reproduction of the species. As any other diversion of energy would be detrimental, women should not partake in any activity, such as education, which could drain the energy needed to be expended in the reproductive organs.
- 5 The accolades heaped upon Sims come from the international medical fraternity as he was a founder of the New York Women's Hospital and inventor of many surgical instruments and techniques (Mendelsohn, 1981, p. 33). His most famous procedure was the closure of vesico-vaginal fistulas, openings between the vagina, rectum and/or the bladder caused through prolonged childbirth and poor natal care (Haeger, 1988, p. 195). The condition leads to a continual incontinent seepage from the bladder and/or the bowels. The unfortunate women with this problem become socially unacceptable, open to serious infection and unable to bear more children.
- 6 Mendelsohn views Sims as being led into gynaecology inadvertently when he inflicted instrument damage during childbirth on Anarcha, a young black slave. In the southern states of America during the period of Sims' practice, female slaves were valued for the babies they could produce to supply the slave markets. Sims had totally devalued Anarcha, a healthy source of "stock" breeding, which inspired him to begin his "experiments" using slaves as his resource material ("guinea pigs"). Sims performed countless operations on his subjects without anaesthetic (but rendered defenceless by opium), Anarcha succumbing to the "knife" thirty times before he achieved a successful "experiment" upon her (1981).



**Part Two:**  
**Roles**

---

## Essay Four: Gender Roles and Interpersonal Relationships: The Concept of "Mothering".

**Rebecca Pauley**

---

*The ideologies discussed in the previous section impact directly on the lives of women and determine their prescribed roles. In a very personal account of her exploration of the myths and constructions surrounding 'mothering' and the role of the mother, Rebecca Pauley argues that mothering need not be gender specific and women who move out of their culturally prescribed roles confront conflict and marginalisation. Rebecca considers the impact of a society which could accept diversity and a multiplicity of roles.*

The highly charged whirl of information, feminist or not, that surrounds the investigation of the topics 'mother', 'mothering' and 'motherhood', underlines dramatically the political importance of these roles. The format of this paper involves an overview and analysis of the topic as a personal response to a body of reading, followed by suggestions developed as strategies for the encouragement of 'nurturing' of children by people, rather than institutionalised and exclusive 'mothering' of children and others by women. This theme, the concept of 'mothering', will be investigated from a feminist perspective.

It is popularly argued that it is a 'natural' component of woman's personality style to nurture, comfort, sense, care and lavish kindly all of her energy to the development and progress of her family (and, by extension, humanity). It is the aim of this paper to pick apart such expectations and to question and wonder about other possibilities. The references that I make in relation to 'families' and traditional 'mothering' is in the context of heterosexual family units with status quo arrangements of sex specific roles. In the section dealing with strategic alternatives to these arrangements, these definitions will be discarded.

\* \* \*

A central issue facing women in western culture, in our pursuit of empowerment, involves the sophisticated and painful unravelling and differentiation of dynamics between the culturally sugared fairy tales of mothering, as compared with lived experiences of women of diverse character and lifestyle. The shattering of the fairy tale can enable sensible and careful decisions to be made in regard to the demands that child rearing involves. Mothering as a package, both idealised and denigrated in terms of the

---

dominant culture, proves a minefield of contradictions for the 'childless' woman. In the attempt to negotiate fruitful and enriching relationships with people in my own life, the possibility of rearing children is an issue which requires special thought and detailed attention. To give birth, to provide for financially, to be emotionally responsible, consistent, unconditionally loving and attentive (among many other requirements), is to ask of oneself an extremely huge commitment. That the commitment is fraught with unequal allocations of accountability between the mother and the father, combined with a culture that trivialises and devalues the everyday mothering of children, increases my fears about the role and heightens my sense of inadequacy. I have been assured in conversations with mothers that the rewards of children outweigh these kinds of fears and while I believe that this is so, the complexity and emotional entanglement that such a commitment involves prompts me to be sceptical and very cautious in undertaking the mothering role.

Adrienne Rich (1979) clearly illustrates the dilemma of a person trying to make sense of a mish-mash of messages. She writes of the difficulty in:

trying to distinguish the two strands; motherhood as experience, one possible and profound experience for women, and motherhood as enforced identity and as political institution (p. 196-197).

I fall somewhere in the middle as I do not feel that I have a sophisticated grasp of the differences as yet. I feel that this paper is the beginning of a long process of reading, listening and thinking in order to try to resolve the complicated responses that such a topic evokes from me. The tasks of reading and of writing on this topic are starting points for the development of insights about mothering. It is lucky that I have encountered this project as it has permitted a degree of prudence that I would not have exercised before. It has also encouraged me to address issues that I had felt were unrelated to me. I had not given birth to a child — how could discourse about cheap, accessible child care, single parenthood and other non-sanctified 'parenting' situations be areas that I needed to write about? This misleading assumption has been challenged by my reading. Through the development of this paper, I have drawn new conclusions about child rearing. For example, I now believe that the process of nurturing children is the responsibility of all people, men and women alike, regardless of biological status of 'parent' or 'mother'. I believe that mothering is not necessarily the behaviour that women only adopt with children. For instance, I have worked as a baby-sitter, considered the idea of

working in a child care centre, cared for younger cousins for various reasons and nurtured my parents, all in a motherly fashion. In short, the concept of 'motherhood' affects women (and young girls) even before they have given birth.

It is useful to draw on a malestream definition of 'mother' in order to indicate pervasive ideological and conceptual arguments of the supposedly 'natural' vocation of mothering.

Mother: having or showing the good, especially tender or kind qualities of a mother (Oxford Dictionary, 1985, p. 660).

This definition, in its context of the English Oxford Dictionary, lends itself to white, middle class, heterosexual mothers who stay in the private domain. Mothers are obviously far more diverse in race, culture, sexuality and class. Such a definition is therefore limited to a specific group and so is inadequate. This definition is also suggestive of the daily, nightly and dependable devotion of the mother to her children and husband that patriarchy demands. It includes the concepts 'good' and 'tender'. I propose that these requirements are a manageable form of nurturing that **people** are capable of, not strictly women and mothers.

The culture that pushes these ideologies — fostering woman's behaviour such that she may strive to fulfil the one sided and impossible 'tender' and 'kind' identity and thus be rewarded and labelled a 'good' mother and therefore a 'good' woman — is unacceptable. This crushes the woman into a two dimensional and stressful position. It has been her task to please and passively comply from birth. She has been trained to fulfil a prescribed role. How is it that women and men are seduced into believing that this is an acceptable path? A variety of explanations suggest how this is maintained. Mothering is advertised widely in patriarchal terms in many forms. For example in media, culture, art and all institutions such as legal, educational and political. Widespread normalising and idealising of the concept of mothering subsumes the lived realities and experiences of those who mother. Those who know.

To be 'motherly' in the popular sense, that is, to be ever 'nice' and self sacrificing/effacing, makes a sham of women's personhood, and denies women the multiplicity of expression that our energies might otherwise be engaged in. It is the institution of motherhood that needs to be redefined and addressed from the point of view(s) of women. M. Rivka Polatnick states:

---

The allocation of child rearing responsibility to women...is no social fiat of nature, but a social policy which supports male domination in the society and in the family (1984, p. 37).

Such a social policy conveniently supplies a pool of people, half the race, who cannot share in power or resources and whose survival is dependent on the good will of husbands. A cornerstone in male domination has been this pool of women, these mothers and wives who care for children and provide for men safe and comfortable havens to retreat to after the day at work, in the paid public domain. Women who deviate from the expected role, who are financially self sufficient and/or demand (at least) contributing child care from care centres or husbands, can be very threatening indeed. Disruption from the traditional pattern infringes upon male power and it is bound to involve much rumbling and outrage about women who step out of their 'proper' place, which serves to comfort, support and unquestioningly fulfil the cardboard cut-out of 'mother'.

If parents maintain the status quo style of child rearing, that is, subordinate mother and public powerful father, children are socialised to repeat this behaviour and to take for granted that it is natural (Polatnick, 1984). Polatnick indicates that it is not particularly surprising that men do not want to overly involve themselves in an activity that is unpaid, repetitive, has low status and is isolating. To exchange the negative facets of mothering for a fuller lifestyle, one with scope in community relationships and mutual respectful acceptance of paid and/or unpaid career (if chosen), is to develop a healing culture and one that allows for uniqueness of personality and child(ren)/parent(s) relationship. The task before us is to celebrate a variety of ever changing roles that are attractive to a variety of people, relevant to those people on their own terms, during differing aspects of their lives.

It is vital to stress here that it is destructive to idealise mothering. In the past, it had been my tendency to do so, in my pursuit for an acknowledgment of women and an empathy for a situation that seemed to me unbalanced and draining. Benjamin (1990) warns convincingly that feminist idealisation of mothering and nurturing confirms polarisations that patriarchal attitudes support. It is sobering to think that celebrating women as mothers can contribute to the subordination of women through naive romanticising. I support the notion of holistic and multi-dimensional roles of women, a possible part of which, is the gestation and care of children.

It was with surprise that I read Adrienne Rich's text *Of Woman Born* (1977). It had never occurred to me that I could choose to have children. I had always assumed that if I was able to fall pregnant, then I would have children. I had been ingrained with the negative images and words of women who chose not to mother. Words like "barren", "childless" "spinster" had haunted me. I am quite ashamed to admit too, that it had been comforting to believe that some time in the future I could reproduce, this promising a binding relationship and also reassuring me that I would not be alone. Rich opened for me the possibility of being a "child free" woman. She has made the option of choice, a reverberating one. Rich states that:

Mothering and non mothering have been such charged concepts for us, precisely because whichever we did has been turned against us (p. 253)

To be able to extricate myself from the culturally learned expectation of becoming a mother, so ingrained due to the "function" of my womb, is to allow myself new and unexpected freedoms. If I now choose to have a child, it will be from a more realistic perspective.

I believe that the best strategy that women can employ in order to redefine the concept 'motherhood', is to look to and acknowledge the multiple lifestyle choices in which women mother. One of the most heartening and illuminating texts that I have encountered on researching this topic is *Why Children?* (Dowrick and Grundberg, 1980). It details the stories of women who mother in the course of their lives and translates to a "childless" woman, some of the implications and emotions such an experience can evoke while lifting the mystery of non-traditional mothers. Nurturing can be expressed in a variety of ways by both women and men. The key is to sabotage the institution that undermines us all. In conclusion, styles of mothering, as this feminist definition suggests, cannot be encapsulated easily.

As single mothers, lesbian mothers and co parenting women continually remind us, there are many ways to provide children with examples of caring which do not incorporate the inequalities of power and privilege which so nicely prepare the next generation to find 'natural' a world in which they will either exploit or be exploited (Kramarae & Treichler, 1992, p. 282).

Let us all engage on finding these caring ways.

## **References**

- Benjamin, J. (1990). **The bonds of love: Psychoanalysis, feminism and the problem of domination.** London: Virago.
- Dowrick, S. and Grundberg, S. (1980). **Why children?** London: Women's Press.
- Kramarae, C. and Treichler, P. (Eds.). (1992). **Amazons, bluestockings and crones.** London: Pandora Press.
- Price Knowles, J. and Cole, E. (Eds.). (1990). **Woman defined motherhood.** New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Rich, A. (1979). **On lies, secrets and silence.** Norton: New York.
- Rich, A. (1992). **Of woman born.** London: Virago.
- The Concise Oxford Dictionary.** (1985). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Trevilcot, J. (Ed.). (1984). **Mothering. Essays in feminist thought.** Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Allanheld.

## **Essay Five: Sisterhood or Motherhood? Is the Childless Wife a Feminist Peer?** **Helen Bulis**

*In this analysis of motherhood ideology and its impact on women, Helen Bulis picks up the point made in the previous essay about the matter of "choice" for mothering. Helen argues that women who choose to marry but remain childless are marginalised not only by the wider society, but also by their feminist peers and she asks does feminism in fact continue to perpetuate motherhood as a dominant ideology in this way?*

In her introduction to **Woman Herself** (1988, p. 15), Robyn Rowland discusses self identity in terms of communal culture — what women learn within their social groups. She further suggests that this learning is validated by "personal experience" and that feminism has supported such validity. In this paper, I will challenge Rowland's suggestion in light of my personal experience as a married childless woman.

This paper will question the acceptance of childless wives as peers and sisters in society and within a feminist analysis. I will hypothesise that the dominant ideology for women is still motherhood. Historical roots have maintained this ideology to the present day. Women who are childless are considered deviant from society's norm. This is exacerbated for those women who are married and fulfil the role of wife but not mother. There seems to be a tolerance for single women who have chosen not to be married and consequently not to have children. Those women have deliberately chosen not to embark on the road to a pro-natalist society. They may have other roles such as career women, artisans, nuns and lesbians. Such roles do not automatically assume motherhood. The married woman, however, is expected to automatically become a mother. The involuntary, childless wife has medical reasons to defend her status. It is the extent of medical intervention that these women will allow to overcome their infertility which incurs the criticism of feminists. Sandelowski (1990, p. 33) uses the term "imperilled sisterhood" for such women. Her discussion reveals an experience of "otherness" for infertile women. Feminists, Sandelowski claims, have put infertile women in a "paradoxical moral position" (1990, p. 43) and have done little to alleviate their infertile sisters' anguish.

I would suggest that these notions of marginalisation extend to those sisters who have chosen not to have children yet and are married, ie. wives in a heterosexual relationship. My assumption is that feminists have ignored any in-depth analysis of married women who choose to be childless. I suggest that



the ideology of motherhood dominates feminist literature and that motherhood has such strong historical origins that it has permeated all the foundations of major thought of this century, including feminism. From its basis in mythology to the twentieth century, motherhood has dominated the world view of women and women's roles. Non-motherhood has not stimulated adequate discussion in the face of the dominant hegemony of motherhood.

In this paper, I will also undertake a brief role analysis suggesting that women are indoctrinated into the role of mother as it is society's expectation of women. The contemporary feminist view discusses some emerging dominant themes on motherhood and their relevance to childless wives. Birth control, imagery, role of the State and fulfilment are the major issues. I will also begin to expose and discuss the stigma associated with non-motherhood.

\* \* \*

The earliest historical beginnings are recorded in mythology and religious documentation. Motherhood and its reverence have strong roots in early history. Hyde (1985, p. 27) reports that "women in myth...have been worshipped for their creativity or fertility and thus valued and revered." This idolatry is confirmed by terms used in the mythology of many cultures such as Earth Mother, Mother of All, Great Mother and fertility goddess. Rich (1986, p. 93) confirms this veneration and concludes that woman "was the primal one being maternal." Rich documents historical examples in the chapter "Primacy of Mother" including Neolithic religious beliefs and she cites archaeologist James Mellaart who, in discovering art of the Neolithic period, suggested the Neolithic female principles was represented by "breast, navel and pregnancy." Mythology was overtaken by the Judeo-Christian religion through its main documentation, the Bible. In the Book of Genesis, the story of Adam and Eve presents the ideology. Hyde argues that Eve was considered not only the original source of sin but notes that "her name is said to mean 'mother of all living'" which in turn suggests a mothering theme "that runs through the Old Testament view of women; the high valuation placed on woman as mother and wife" (1985, p. 34). The partnership of wife and mother is therefore validated both in mythological roots and in the teachings of the Judeo-Christian religions.

From early Christian to medieval times, motherhood continued to be a significant role for women. In her critique of women in society, Ker suggests that "hereditary land holding placed great importance on a woman's role as child bearer" (1983, p. 38). Whether a medieval wife could continue the family line or not does not seem to have been a matter of choice for her. Women who

were barren sought the answer from religion and Ker cites an excerpt from a noblewoman's Book of Hours. The childless Mary of Guelders appeals to God to reward her with child if she remains pious — an equivalence with the Virgin Mary. Sadly, Mary of Guelders died childless but Ker asks whether "she had not in all probability chose[n] that role [of mother] freely" (1983, p. 4).

Voluntary motherhood as a concept did not appear until the mid nineteenth century. Linda Gordon (1982, p. 42) notes that in America from the 1840s, the birth control movement was undertaken within the early women's movement. Gordon suggests the phrase "for voluntary motherhood" actually meant "no anti-motherhood implications" but rather initiated the ideology "that willing mothers would be better mothers" (p. 421). This was a precursor to the eugenics movement which will be discussed later in this paper.

The Victorian era has been well documented regarding attitudes to women. In terms of literary resources, Patricia Klaus (1979) suggests that the Victorian novel "extolled the family and regarded marriage as the 'one great profession' for women" (1979, p. 299). Women who were not married were given the label of "spinster" — a term which for medieval women described their work activity of spinning. There is considerable discussion in the literature about single women who more often than not chose a life of celibacy. Patricia Jalland (1983, p. 134) sums up this group of women as "inevitably devalued." I would suggest that a married woman of this time who chose not to or could not have children would have been more devalued than her spinster sister. Margaret Fuller, a nineteenth century scholar and feminist is quoted by Rich (1986) as having found comfort "in the children of the muses" even though she "craved" to be a mother. While this resignation to childlessness is documented historically, there is little debate on women who freely chose not to mother.

The onset of more readily available contraception in the latter part of the nineteenth century made a significant difference to the concept of choice for women. Nevertheless, motherhood remained the dominant ideology of this period. Sabine Willis reports that in 1876, when the Church of England Mother's Union was formed, "women pledged themselves to work for the maintenance of motherhood and the family" (1980, p.173). As the Church of England was the mainstay of Christianity in both England and Australia, women of both countries were not exposed to any other ideologies. The edict of motherhood also extended into rural Australia. The Mother Union sponsored caravans in Bunbury (WA), Gippsland (Vic.) and Bathurst (NSW) (Willis, 1980, p. 180). The Union's aims included:

to awaken in mothers of all classes, a sense of their great responsibility in the training of their boys and girls (the fathers and mothers of the future) (p. 180).

In this way, women who were not mothers could have been perceived as having no responsibility in the Nation's future. They would not have been valued and deemed to be unpatriotic. As Willis suggests "womanhood was equated with motherhood and motherhood with the holy of holies" (1980, p. 183). In an Archbishop's address in 1903, women attending the service were reminded that "motherhood is God's antidote for a lonely heart...and those who choose childlessness will have many a bitter pang" (Willis, 1980, p. 183). The words "to choose" herald an era during which women in Australia were beginning to understand that they may have a choice.

\* \* \*

Family planning in Australia was beginning to be debated at the turn of the century. The interest in family planning was prompted by the broad social issue of perpetuation of the human race. There was concern both in England and Australia about a declining birth rate and that births that did occur were mainly within the "lower classes". This double-edged concern is discussed in detail by Bacchi (1980) where she explains that the Birth Rate Commission of NSW in 1903 was concerned about the "increasing 'selfishness' among women" (p. 147) who were choosing careers and not motherhood. There was constant propaganda promoting "the glory of motherhood" and the woman who:

enters the married state with the deliberate intention of having no children, who seeks the gratification of the sexual passion without the responsibility of motherhood should be regarded as no better than a mistress or a prostitute (Bacchi, 1980, p. 148).

While this was written in 1904, I would argue that these values have not in fact weakened in the ninety years since.

The push for motherhood to stem the declining birth rate was not primarily only about family planning as there was also a concern about the "quality" of offspring. The women who were choosing careers and not motherhood were educated. The uneducated woman was in fact maintaining the birth rate but because she came from the "lower classes" she was assumed to give birth to a lower life and such assumptions underpinned the eugenics movement. Birth control was not to give all women a choice. It was itself a "class" driven device and in this debate, many lower class women were

labelled as "feeble minded" and "mad". Bacchi writes that the pro-eugenics movement believed that the lower class birth rate could be addressed by "institutionalisation, sterilisation, eugenic marriage laws and strict immigration controls" (1980, p. 147). Such methods were not considered for women who were educated and/or of better class.

The suffragettes who were campaigning at the time did not actively support the Eugenics movement. Vida Goldstein<sup>1</sup>, the Australian suffragette, continued to promote motherhood and not to "deter women from becoming mothers but rather wishes to strengthen them within that role" (Bacchi, 1980, p. 149). The first wave feminists wanted women to have the freedom to determine when to have a family and the number of children in that family. The movement did not really consider saying "no" to having children as "motherhood then was the only challenging, dignified and rewarding work that women could get" (Gordon, 1982, p. 45). The childless wife was, therefore, by extension undignified and unrewarded. While early feminists in this period were for contraception, few artificial devices were available to them. Abstinence was a natural method but the emerging feminists sought other options. Rubber diaphragms had limited distribution although two American feminists, members of the Socialist Party, ensured their availability in that country (Gordon, 1982, p. 46). The promotion of contraception still focussed on women as mothers as it was seen as a way to "space" babies to ensure they and their mothers were healthy. In this way, the first wave feminists promoted the ideology of motherhood thus ignoring and excluding their childless counterparts.

Motherhood continued to dominate the women's movement in the 1920s and 1930s both in England and Australia. Magazines and newspapers were widely distributed, accessible and read by many women. Women also contributed to such magazines, either as writers of articles or submitting letters to the editor. Adela Pankhurst Walsh established an organisation called the "Australian Women's Guild of Empire" with an accompanying publication called *The Guild of Empire Gazette*. Adela used the organisation and its paper to promote "marriage and family as women's proper and most rewarding sphere" (Daniels and Murnane, 1980, p. 148). Such publicity prompted debate especially through another magazine called *Working Woman*. One such contribution in the January 1932 edition was a report on the "Women's Committee of the Australian Communist Party", in particular, their views on birth control. These women recognised that birth control knowledge was not just "to determine the size of their families" but also "to make child bearing a voluntary function" (1980, p. 157).

This recognition of voluntary motherhood is not supported by any other documentation that I researched in preparing this paper. On the contrary, the literature at this time is dominated by the promotion of motherhood. In 1936, women were encouraged to prepare for marriage including the exchange of health certificates between bride and groom which was tantamount to a guarantee that the woman was able to produce children after marriage (Daniels and Murnane, 1980, p. 142).

The declining birthrate was again an issue in the 1940s in Australia when the National Health and Medical Research Council published a "pro-natalist" report in 1944. However, by recognising that mothers needed help with "housework, child care, maternal and infant welfare service", the report did not take an overall hard line approach (Cass, 1983, p. 168). Another report on the declining birth rate in 1944 was the *"Resolution of the United Associations of Women's Conference on the Birth Rate"*. It reinforced that "the work of bearing and rearing of children is still the most important job a woman can do for herself and her country" (Daniels and Murnane, 1980, p. 138). Women who wanted to be mothers were considered patriotic as well — they were having children for their country. World War II was at its peak in 1944, strengthening patriotism.

I suggest that married women in this period of patriotic fervour would have felt intimidated into having children for the nation's good. The rebuilding of nations after the war would have included the rebuilding of the population. There would have been no question of choice as married women who would have considered voluntary childlessness could have been labelled as unpatriotic. At worst, such women could have been labelled as traitors if they did not ascribe to the dominant ideology of motherhood. Adrienne Rich summarises the plight of a childless woman in recorded history as a "failed woman" (1986, p. 2). This "failure" is devaluing for the childless wife who consciously chooses to digress from the norms of a pro-natalist society.

\* \* \*

This next section will discuss those roles which dominate women's lives, ie. those of wife and mother. In her major analysis of Australian society, Matthews (1984, p. 87), clearly lays down the case for the "good" woman as being a married woman and an ideal mother (1984, p. 87). The present day cultural milieu is dominated by motherhood and even, as Sandelowski (1990, p. 34) suggests, "subverts sisterhood". The sisterhood analysis will be explored in the next section. Society as a whole is not so concerned with sisterhood but does have expectations for women who are wives. Women who "had not

conformed to the dominant life trajectory" (Alexander et al. 1993, p. 623) of wife and mother are pressured by society to fulfil both roles, not one.

There is a universal acceptance of motherhood and it is by women in society, not just by men. Matthews believes that motherhood is also "most encouraged by all the gender order's institutions and agencies" (1984, p. 195). Rejection of motherhood is not accepted and is considered abnormal (Veevers, 1975, p. 478). Society dictates the norm which is that a wife **becomes** a mother. Dumas (1988) explains that women themselves often cannot consciously separate motherhood from womanhood. Women are continually under pressure to marry, then to bear children and eventually to become grandmothers. Why would women marry if it was not to fulfil their roles as mothers? This reasoning remains with women all their lives.

Older childless women interviewed by Alexander *et al* (1992) tell their stories. One told of the "high school teacher asking the class about the purpose of marriage. She (the teacher) said: 'The reason for marriage is procreation. And to live on through your children'. I never forgot that" (p. 621). Such messages as: "they are put on this earth to procreate through marriage" and "they cannot be just a wife" dominate women all their lives. Women are also "taught" to be women in other ways. Society teaches women they will be "rewarded and punished to assuming the 'right' identity" (Rowland, 1988, p. 15). These societal expectations are "internalised" by women (Matthews, 1984, p. 177) and women who do not fulfil these expectations can anticipate punishment. They are bombarded by a dominant ideology manifested through media messages, teaching, norms and historical entrenchment. Society is made up of 50% of women, some of them educated and encouraged to question. Do such women, many of whom are contemporary feminists, fend off this bombardment and really question the ideology of motherhood?

From my brief historical analysis, it can be seen that the identity for women is clearly Mother, with other roles such as Sister or Wife, being secondary. The childless wife, one can assume, will be punished not rewarded. The **good** woman's life was considered fulfilling and culminating if she was a mother (Matthews, 1984, p. 186). The **bad** woman is punished and among other things, society marginalises her. Such marginalisation is described as "the circumstance of being culturally defined as different and peripheral" (Alexander et al., 1992, p. 624). The dominant cultural expectation being that of mother, a childless wife is considered "peripheral". The perception of deviance of childless wives is supported by Veevers. He lists the elements of deviancy as "statistically, socially, ethically and perhaps even psycholog-

ically" present (1975, p. 473). All of these indicators and societal expectations are what childless wives are measured against and the result is their marginalisation.

There has been considerable documentation on the ideology of motherhood from a feminist point of view. These views have been analysed in various frameworks with some dominant themes such as birth control, imagery, the role of the State and fulfilment emerging. A less dominant theme is the stigma of those wives who choose to be childless. It is less well documented by feminists perhaps as it has less importance ascribed to it.

Birth control, family planning and reproductive rights had their beginnings in the early part of this century. The introduction of advanced contraceptive technology has refined the debate, condoms and the continuing improvement of the Pill being two such examples. Are women of today in a better position to decide to whether or not to be mothers? The second wave feminists would argue "yes" as "[t]he issue of reproductive control is a part of an overall calculus of how to improve women's situation" (Gordon, 1982, p. 49). This control points to a case for voluntary motherhood and this choice is well accepted by feminists (Segal, 1988; Eisenstein, 1984). There is some dispute, however, about the avenues for choice. Yes, there is contraception, but there is also some debate about abortion being accepted as a tool of choice. Rich (1986, p. 268) suggests that "no free woman with 100% effective, non-harmful birth control would 'choose' abortion." Simone de Beauvoir, on the other hand, thinks legal abortion "would permit a woman to undertake her maternities in freedom" (1987, p. 510). This paper cannot explore the pros and cons of abortion. However, any reference to women and their choice to be mothers needs to take into account the methodology of that choice.

Voluntary motherhood could have been influenced by the options available to women. Birth control measures, regardless of facts and propaganda, are not always safe nor freely available. For some women, there may have been no choice. The State may have influenced a woman's choice to be a mother as de Beauvoir argues that a woman's duty was to provide society with children and asks "does the State take woman under guardianship and ask only that she be mother?" (1987, p. 446-447). Since that was written (in the late 1940s) the State has provided "guardianship" support and provided public policies for women choosing to be mothers. The introduction of maternity leave in a woman's contemporary working life reinforces that a woman can work but she can also mother (Baldock, 1983, p. 45). Child care has also been introduced with its priority of access being for women who are

working and/or training. The State provides financial support to mothers. Child endowment was introduced to recognise "the economic contribution made by women's non market work of motherhood and domestic labour (Cass, 1983, p. 63). Other State benefits such as Family Assistance Supplement and Supporting Parents Benefit support motherhood. What does the State do for non-mothers except collect their taxes and subsidise the mothers in society? Childless wives are more likely to be in the workforce and therefore contributing to the nation's revenue. There are little financial and institutional rewards for non-mothers. The State continues to perpetuate the ideology of motherhood.

Rich believes that "a new organisation of culture" (cited in Eisenstein, 1984, p. 77) is needed before women can release "the shackles of motherhood." The State is only part of that culture and it alone cannot determine a society's attitude regarding children by choice. Feminists have a responsibility to influence change and create the new order. There are few feminists who do, in fact, address the non-motherhood issue. The right to choose is an individual right and Gordon reminds us that a feminist program and philosophy should defend individual rights (1982, p. 51). These individuals include childless wives. Do feminists, then, include these wives in their philosophy and programs? Lynne Segal (1988, p. 145) suggests that the literature is dominated by mothering and has spurred "maternal triumphalism". She asks whether feminists have tried to do too much including having children. Eisenstein (1984, p. 69) explains that in the early 1970s, "feminism and motherhood were in diametrical opposition" but this opposition has waned ever since. Motherhood returns triumphantly back into the feminist world! In most feminist books, readings and articles, motherhood, mothering and children are all listed in the respective indices. The term "childlessness" does not get listed, yet, it is likely to be discussed in the text. It seems to be described within the more familiar terminology such as reproductive rights and motherhood. The debate about women who are childless wives in feminist literature is immersed in the sea of words relating to the dominant motherhood ideology. Segal summarises three feminist views on mothering as follows:

Dinnerstein, Rich and Chodorow began to write of mothering in a different way: to attempt to grapple with the full psychological complexity of women's desire to mother and the full political significance of the institution of mothering (1988, p. 135).

Those feminists did explore mothering in that context and there was some discussion about voluntary motherhood as opposed to other feminist



analyses. One example of such a discussion on voluntary motherhood can be found in Eisenstein (1984) where she critiques all of the above named writers. The references to childlessness are few but they are there. Chodorow states that "women became mothers because they were responding to a pervasive social ideology about the correct role for women" (1984, p. 88). The discussion fails to address the conscious decision by wives. The failure to identify and address this specific issue is highlighted in Eisenstein's critique of Rich. Eisenstein concludes that Rich "considered the effects of motherhood as an institution upon women" (1984, p. 69).

However, there is no real discussion on childless women who have deliberately ignored the institution of motherhood. Closer examination of Rich's text *Of Woman Born* (1986) does expose some debate on the childless woman. The fact that Rich actually lists "childlessness" in her index is encouraging. She is one of the few feminists (if not the only one in my literature review), who details any discussion on "non-mothers". She agrees with my hypothesis that such women are defined in stigmatised terms and the language is enlightening as "unchilded", "childless" simply define her in terms of a lack; even "childfree" suggests only that she has refused motherhood, not what she is about in and of herself (Rich, 1986, p. 249). Although Rich does identify childlessness as an issue, she does homogenise this group, failing to separate single women and married wives. There is no reference to the wife who has consciously chosen to be childless. "It is in maternity that woman fulfils her physiological destiny" writes Simone de Beauvoir in her opening sentence to the chapter entitled "The Mother" (1987, p. 501). The woman who chooses to be childless, then, will not be fulfilled biologically. Motherhood ideology also perpetuates a sociological and mental fulfilment. Burns poses the questions: "Why do women continue to marry?" Some of her conclusions support the notion of fulfilment: "There are more benefits in having a child (love, interest, future orientation) than not" (1986, p. 218).

A national survey was undertaken over a period from 1971-1982 in Australia by the Institute of Family Studies. Grieve (1986, p. 215) reports that a considerable percentage of women agreed with the statement: "A woman is only really fulfilled when she is a mother." These attitudes of motherhood equating to total fulfilment tend to suggest that a non-mother is unfulfilled, "barren" and perhaps not a total woman. The childless wife as perceived by society and as documented by feminist writers and analysts is incomplete. Childless wives have been labelled throughout history as "unfulfilled", "barren" and "empty". Rich adds that they are also "omitted from the hypocritical and palliative reverence accorded the mother" (1986, p. 251).

Hypocritical the reverence may be, but the labels of childless women are even more irreverent. The so-called "myth of maternal omnipotence" (Chodorow, 1982, p. 71) is not in fact a myth at all. The ideology of motherhood is a dominant theme for a feminist analysis which itself is dominated by the power of mothering. Feminists have done little to dispel the myth and as Sandelowski suggests, feminists should accept some blame for "perpetuating the motherhood mandate" (1990, p. 40) by re-emphasising "women's experiences of maternity as the basis for women's empowerment" (p. 45). There is little serious discussion by feminists about wives and their choice to remain childless as the issue is continually overtaken by generalities of voluntary motherhood. Childless wives are not seriously considered as feminist peers. There is not enough documentation to suggest anything different.

It is not only society's message, "you are less without a child" (Dumas, 1988, p. 40), that childless wives have to bear. They are wounded further by the paucity of feminist literature and discussion that considers them seriously. Childless wives have consciously chosen to be different. Can they look forward to being accepted as sisters? Can we take heart from Adrienne Rich's call?

Women, mothers or not, who feel committed to other women are increasingly giving each other a quality of caring (1986, p. 253).

## References

- Alexander, B., Rubinstein, R., Goodman, M., and Luborsky, M. (1992). A path not taken: A cultural analysis of regrets and childlessness in the lives of older women. *The Gerontologist*, 32, p. 618-626.
- Allen, J. (1986). Evidence and silence: Feminism and the limits of history. In C. Pateman and E. Gross (Eds.), *Feminist challenges. Social and political theory*. (p. 173-189). Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Bacchi, C. (1980). Evolution, eugenics and women. In E. Windschuttle (Ed.), *Women, class and history. Feminist perspectives on Australia 1788-1978*. (p. 132-153). Melbourne: Dominion Press.
- Beauvoir, S. de (1987). *The second sex*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Burns, A. (1986). Why do women continue to marry? In N. Grieve and A. Burns (Eds.). **Australian women. New feminist perspectives.** (p. 210-232). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Callan, V. (1987). The personal and marital adjustment of mothers and of voluntarily and involuntarily childless wives. **Journal of Marriage and the Family**, 49, 847-856.
- Chodorow, N. and Contrato, S. (1982). The fantasy of the perfect mother. In B. Thorne, and M. Yalom (Eds.). **Rethinking the family. Some feminist questions.** (p. 54-75). London: Longman.
- Dalton, S. (1992). Lived experiences of never-married women. **Issues in mental health nursing**, 13, 69-80.
- Daniels, K. and Murnane, M. (1980). **Australia's women. A documentary history.** Melbourne: University of Queensland Press.
- Davis, E.G. (1973). **The first sex.** Baltimore: Penguin.
- Dixon, M. (1986). Gender, class and the women's movements in Australia 1890-1980. In N. Grieve and A. Burns (Eds.). **Australian women. New feminist perspectives.** (p. 14-26). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Duxas, L. (1988). Childless by choice. **Health**, 20, 44-49.
- Eisenstein, H. (1984). **Contemporary feminist thought.** London: Unwin.
- Eisenstein, H. (1986). **Gender shock. Practising feminism on two continents.** Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Gordon, L. (1982). Why nineteenth century feminists did not support "birth control" and twentieth century feminists do: Feminism, reproduction and the family. In B. Thorne, and M. Yalom (Eds.). **Rethinking the family. Some feminist questions.** (p. 40-53). London: Longman.
- Grieve, N. and Burns, A. (1986). The psychology of women and feminist thought: An ambivalent liaison? In N. Grieve and A. Burns (Eds.). **Australian women. New feminist perspectives.** (p. 122-141). Melbourne. Oxford University Press.
-

- Hyde, J. (1991). **Half the human experience — the psychology of women.** (4th Ed.). Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co.
- Jalland, P. (1983). Victorian spinsters: Dutiful daughters, desperate rebels and the transition to the new woman. In P. Crawford (Ed.). **Exploring women's past — essays in social history.** (p. 129-170). Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Ker, M. (1983). Brides of Christ and of poor mortals: Women in mediaeval society. In P. Crawford (Ed.). **Exploring women's past. Essays in social history.** (p. 7-47). Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Klaus, P. (1979). Women in the mirror: Using novels to study Victorian women. In B. Danner (Ed.). **The women of England from anglo-saxon times to the present. Interpretive bibliographical essays.** (p. 138-182). Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books.
- Mackenzie, C. (1986). Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy and/or the female body. In C. Pateman and E. Gross (Eds.). **Feminist challenges. social and political theory.** (p. 144-156). Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Matthews, J.J. (1984). **Good and mad women. The historical construction of feminity in twentieth-century Australia.** Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Murray, J.H. (1982). **Strong minded women and other lost voices from nineteenth century England.** Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Nave-Herz, R. (1989). Childless marriages. **Marriage and Family Review**, 14, 1-2, 23-50.
- Ramazanoglu, C. (1989). **Feminism and the contradictions of oppression.** London: Routledge.
- Rice, S. (1989). Single, older childless women: Differences between never married and widowed women in life satisfaction and social support. **Journal of Gerontological Social Work**, 3, 3-4, 35-97.
- Rich, A. (1986). **Of woman born. Motherhood as experience and institution.** London: Virago.
-

- Rowland, R. (1988). **Woman herself. A transdisciplinary perspective on women's identity.** Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Sandelowski, M. (1990). Fault lines: Infertility and imperiled sisterhood. **Feminist Studies**, Spring, 16, 33-51.
- Segal, L. (1988). **Is the future female? Troubled thoughts on contemporary feminism.** London: Virago.
- Simms, M. (1981). The Australian feminist experience. In N. Grieve and P. Grimshaw (Eds.). **Australian women. Feminist perspectives.** (p. 227-239). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Veevers, J.E. (1975). The moral careers of voluntary childless wives: Notes on the defense of a variant world view. **The Family Coordinator**, 24, October, 473-487.
- Willis, S. (1980). Homes are divine workshops. In E. Windschuttle (Ed.). **Women, class and history. Feminist perspectives on Australia 1788-1978.** (p. 173-189). Melbourne: Dominion Press.

---

<sup>1</sup> Vida Goldstein (1869-1949). Australian activist, suffragette and publisher. The first woman to stand for the Senate in 1903 and the founding President of the anti-war group, the Women's Peace Army, in 1915.

---

## Essay Six: Where do the Stresses Within the Struggle for a Lesbian Family Come From?

Leanne Klein

---

*The pervasiveness of the ideology of motherhood determines that 'families' be heterosexual in nature. In this paper, Leanne Klein argues that Lesbian mothers face great stresses in maintaining their integrity as both mothers and sexual beings. The 'struggle' is both an internal and external one, as she explains.*

While lesbianism is a way of living, with assumptions on the value and meaning of the self, society denies itself an opportunity to learn more about women and how they can function by making the Lesbian seal off her Lesbianism in all her interactions with society. It is this lack of acceptance which prevents Lesbians from understanding the true nature of their sexual preferences in the same way as heterosexuals. In fact, the discovering of homosexual difference is often accompanied by intense confusion and anxiety, as well as a feeling of failure because of the sense of not conforming to the norms of society. Tradition still holds a firm grasp upon the majority of Lesbians, affects their Lesbian practice and there exists an awareness of the struggle for a Lesbian to have a life in a family with her partner. It is interesting, however, to discover that part of the stresses within this struggle is caused by members of the Lesbian community, not just the heterosexual one.

In this paper, the struggle for a Lesbian family will be examined as well as what ideologies and societal institutions have had a detrimental effect on the lives of Lesbians. In particular, I will be analysing the role of the Church, the State and the 'ideal family'. Throughout the paper, feminist perspectives will be discussed in comparison to the majority of society's views concerning the family, marriage, relationships, child custody and parenting which all have an effect on the Lesbian family. It is because society is still living with the ideology of the family, an ideology which includes the sexual division of labour and encourages the concept of a dominant male and submissive female, that society maintains its apprehension about the concept of a Lesbian, or indeed any other alternative family form. The traditional family embodies modern aspirations for personal happiness and fulfilment:

It is represented as a haven for recovery of the 'outside world', where in privacy the husband and wife in a loving relationship can support and nurture each other and their children (Gordon, 1990, p. 29).

---

In reality the circumstances of the lives of large numbers of people do not conform to this familial ideology — people live alone, in one parent families, communally and in homosexual relationships. Moreover, the economic basis of security presupposed in the construction of the family is missing for many people and relationships within a 'family' can be such that it is a site of struggle rather than pleasure. This point is the main basis of arguments that Lesbian feminists have concerning the family.

\* \* \*

It is the sexual division of labour which solidifies the structure of the modern family. "This division is part of the social labour process in which men are engaged in 'male' jobs and women function in 'female' tasks" (Ettore, 1980, p. 18). The sexual division of labour accounts for the persistence of the sexual dominance of men and the subordination of women and, therefore, sexuality is given the power to define cultural values and social productivity. However, as Ettore suggests, "regardless of power, sexuality is consistently made private or divorced from society. Sex/work, the private/the public, work in the home/work in the factory, domestic labour/productive labour, reproduction/production and female/male are socially constructed opposites" (1980, p. 19), all of which relate directly to the idea about the sexual division of labour. These opposites also indicate the existence of a dominant sexual ideology, one which dictates that women should enact passive or subservient roles and be concerned with procreation, while men should live out dominant social roles and concern themselves with protection and providing for others. Unfortunately, society believes that these respective roles are not only natural on the individual level but also morally correct on the social level. Thus, the goodness of any society's sexual morality preserves itself in and through the continuance of the sexual division of labour and ultimately, the perpetuation of heterosexual roles.

Homosexuality is therefore constructed as a rejection of a traditional, dominant sexual ideology which is heterosexual and male oriented. Feminists argue that "homosexuality is the concrete realisation that some men aspire to practice 'social femininity' while some women desire to practice 'social masculinity'" (Ettore, 1980, p. 20). Lesbian women, as the "social males" tend to take up the unquestioned possibility of doing, or the practice of being, productive, rather than just reproductive. Homosexuality upsets the dominant sexual ideology as well as confusing major issues such as: that heterosexuality is ordained by nature; that sex roles are natural and normal; and that masculine and feminine qualities are inherent in each sex. Homosexuality

denies the primacy of the family as both an idea and an institution. As a result, the sexual division of labour becomes blurred.

Generally, Lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under "disease". Rich (1980) argues that the reason for this destruction of records and memorabilia and letters documenting the realities of Lesbian existence "must be taken very seriously as a means of keeping heterosexuality compulsory for women, since what has been kept from our knowledge is joy, sensuality, courage and community, as well as guilt, self betrayal and pain" (p. 649). Feminists have also criticised the fact that Lesbians have historically been deprived of a political existence through their inclusion as female versions of male homosexuality. Again, in this example, female reality is denied and erased and not seen as being important enough to be separate from men.

Although there is a lack of information on Lesbian history, their collective social history is roughly divided into several epochs. The Golden Age in the distant past was seen by many Lesbians as a time dimly remembered and imperfectly documented because of the vested interest of male historians working within a patriarchal paradigm. This Golden Age:

included such symbols of the strength of the female principles as workshop of the Mother Goddess, a matriarchal and therefore harmonious culture, the great tribe of women warriors, the Amazons, and the historical figure of the famous power and intellectual whose name has been closely identified with the flowering of lesbianism at its highest point, Sappho of Lesbos (Wolf, 1979, p. 25).

However this Golden epoch ended with the rise of patriarchal Judeo-Christian traditions in which Mother worship was superseded by one male godhead and the role of women and of Lesbians became subordinate to that of men.

The second crucial period in Lesbian history was about 1300-1700 in Europe, which is looked upon by some as a time of martyrdom for women, particularly those women who were healers and secret followers of the Mother cult and who were burned as witches by the Church. Wolf (1979) argues that many of the estimated nine million women who were burned were said to be Lesbians, and it was this "difference from the norm which led to their being accused of witchcraft" (p. 25).

---



The third epoch, a more recent period, was the early of part of the twentieth century, in which a particular group of women identified themselves as Lesbians and publicly led lives which were colourful and creative.

Flaunting the end of the Victorian repression, women of means or of artistic ability congregated, many in liaisons with other women, and because of their privileged positions were allowed to do so with little censure (Wolf, 1979, p. 26).

To many other women, they represented a new kind of freedom.

However, the more usual reality for recent generations of Lesbians was bleak decades during which most of them experienced oppression, exposure and an internalised view of Lesbianism as a social tension. Socialist-feminists argue that major institutions such as the State and the Church have helped to perpetuate the view of the Lesbian as, at best, an undesirable "deviant". Both these social institutions have great influence on the lives of Lesbians and in their struggle for a family life. What kind of self image has the Church given the Lesbian? Less than human, sinner, celibate, unworthy, evil minded, accursed, wicked and impure. Christian religions traditionally have been hostile to homosexuality.

They were the dominant institutions in establishing attitudes about homosexuality which were not so much Biblical or even Christian, but a reflection of undercurrents of thought in existence at the time Christianity emerged (Dynes, 1990, p. 224).

These extraneous ideas about sex and homosexuality were incorporated into Christian teachings by theologians and canon lawyers who then erected a belief system upon them. From the Church they were then communicated to the wider society. However, Lesbian feminists are questioning every aspect of the culture they were socialised into accepting and are in the process of redefining, within the feminist context, such hallowed concepts as God 'the Father'. Lesbian feminists are not religious in the traditional sense since to be so implies the worship of a patriarchal godhead which contradicts their own beliefs. Some Lesbians continue to have a need for spirituality rituals and even for organised religion and in these cases because of the "strong sense that homosexuals are sinful [which] has persisted for so long" (Wolfe, 1979, p. 27), many women choose to go to Church as a closet Lesbian.

There is not now and never has been a law in Australia against Lesbianism as such. This situation is attributed to an apocryphal remark by Queen Victoria who, when asked whether women were to be included in the new laws being enacted against homosexual men is reported to have said two ladies would never engage in such despicable acts. Australian laws have their basis in English common law and thus the "attitude of taking Lesbianism less seriously than male homosexuality has pertained until today" (Wolf, 1979, p. 29). The only area in which women are more heavily penalised by the courts for Lesbianism is in custody cases involving Lesbian mothers. This shows that once again a woman's importance is viewed in terms of motherhood.

In both the State and Church ideologies, heterosexuality and therefore the 'family' was, and is, seen as the ideal. In this sense, the family becomes both a historical construction and a pervasive ideology. Grittens (1988) argues that implicit in the concept of the Western family is a notion of male dominance based on paternal authority and power. Feminists argue that "the oppression of women is centrally constructed with the family, ideologically and materially" (Gordon, 1990, p. 30). Research indicates that women are not equal within families and they carry the major burdens of housework and child care often as well as paid employment. Kelly (1980) argues that the family is becoming increasingly inadequate to meet the emotional demands placed on women by it. This is evident in the rising rates of mental illness, suicide, neurosis and drinking among married women. Feminists challenge "marriage" as a site of women's economic oppression and where there is a "lack of power and inadequacy in marital roles" (Zinn and Eitzen, 1990, p. 6).

Unlike Lesbian relations where there is a rejection of the dominant sexual ideology and a high level of equality, the heterosexual marriage and family involves women's acceptance of male authority and the sexual division of labour. Within Lesbian relationships, fidelity and monogamy are the norm and emotional attachment is valued very highly. Equality is notably evident and manifested in the equal sharing of household tasks and in stated preferences for equal power within the family. Despite a false stereotype within society, another characteristic of the Lesbian relationship is the **absence** of stereotyped sex role behaviour.

The societal stereotype implies that in the Lesbian relationship, 'butch' and 'femme' roles are played by the women. That is, they mimic the male and female roles found in heterosexual relationships. However, Lesbians reject heterosexual relationships because they are not happy with such roles. Probably society cannot grasp the concept of doing away with sex roles in a relationship

---

and of an equality between partners, so they "propose" what happens in their relationships happens in Lesbian ones too. Macklin and Rubin (1983) argue that in contrast to the less equal division in heterosexual couples, "[l]esbian relationships are more flexible and are determined more by preference than by a predetermined standard" (p. 226). Feminists and Lesbian feminists agree and suggest that one of their goals in the struggle for self has been to create identities as women rather than in their relationship to men.

As one of the conscious efforts by homosexuals is to reject the dominant marriage model that prescribes specific and unequal roles, the question needs to be asked: why do some Lesbians remain in their heterosexual marriage? There are two main reasons why some Lesbian women struggle in this way. The first is because of the stigmatisation society places on homosexual relationships and the second is for their children. In the latter situation, a Lesbian mother will remain in a homosexual relationship to avoid problems in child custody battles. If the Lesbian mother wants her children to live with her and her Lesbian partner, a tedious struggle lies ahead of her if her husband will not allow her custody of their children. If matters cannot be settled between them, the Lesbian mother is virtually placed on trial for being an "unfit" woman and for challenging her husband's custodial rights. In custody law, judges are in charge of examining what is in the best interests of the child. However, what is in fact under scrutiny is the mother's lesbianism.

Most custody cases have resulted in the denial of custody to Lesbian mothers or severe limitations to visitation rights — the mother's lover may not be present, the child may not spend the night, and so forth (Dynes, 1990, p. 714).

The mother's lesbianism is seen as utterly detrimental to the child because of the following assumptions:

that the child will necessarily or consequently grow up to be homosexual; that they will be at greater risk of emotional disturbance; that they live in danger of sexual molestation by the friends of the parent; and that children living with a homosexual parent will experience severe stigmatisation (Talbot, 1985, p. 38).

These reasons are very disturbing because these days every child, whether their parents are homosexuals or not, can be influenced by all of these assumptions. In fact, research has shown no significant difference in the general emotional and psychological well being of the children of Lesbian

women as compared with those of heterosexual mothers. Feminists even suggest that children of Lesbians may in fact be more flexible, independent and aware of greater options in life. Moreover, they may profit from greater nurturing and support if they grow up in a household where their mother's Lesbian lover (as opposed to a male lover) is present.

Contrary to these apparent advantages, legal custody is still in favour of the father in these situations. As Talbot (1985) reports, published records of thirteen cases heard by the Australian Family Court showed that custody was awarded to the gay parent in ten instances. However, the court required that the parents hide their homosexuality in six of the ten instances, thus reflecting and reinforcing the negative view of homosexual relationships. The ideology of the State and its institutions, in this case, the law, are still holding moral stigmatisation attached to homosexual behaviour. Since custody struggles have resulted and are still resulting in so few victories for Lesbians, most lawyers urge the Lesbian mother to try to settle the matter out of court. Consequently, this becomes yet another example of how the State, acting for society, sends women back to the private realm of the home, by suggesting that these matters are best settled within the privacy of the home. Paradoxically, it was these Lesbian women who wanted to get out of the 'private' home because of inequality in the first place and thus a problem emerges, something I would describe as the Lesbian being really "stuck".

If a Lesbian mother has custodial rights of her children and lives with her Lesbian partner, the next struggle she must undertake arises concerning parenting. The Lesbian mother is living in a society which favours the ideology of motherhood in a heterosexual marriage. This ideology, a particular cultural, social and structural construction of mothering and motherhood, is presented as "natural" and "instinctive". Society "devalues the work of child care while idealising motherhood" (Gordon, 1990, p. 32) thus creating tensions between women's experiences of mothering and the social construction of motherhood. Motherhood holds an ambivalent status in our society. Feminists argue that it values women as mothers for the work they do, not as a person, or even as a woman. Therefore, Lesbian feminist mothers believe themselves to be in a transitional stage, in which they try to live their lives and raise their children in terms of non-hierarchical principles. Because they feel that they themselves were raised in a sexist culture, they feel they must work to overcome the impact of this early socialisation. Their hope is that their children, raised in a non-sexist environment, will be able to live their lives closer to their own "ideal". Wolf puts it this way:

---

Lesbians want their daughters and sons to allow themselves to be tender and nurturing, strong and self confident, without regard to their sex. They want their children to allow themselves the full range of emotions available to them, to be in fact, the first generation of human beings (1979, p. 152).

To counteract the negative views held by society of their lifestyles, most Lesbian mothers try to instil in their children a necessary sense of distance in the hope that the children will not develop negative judgments about themselves and their families. These mothers also try to give their children positive reinforcement by socialising with other Lesbian mothers and their children and by allowing their children contact with other people who do not share these negative views. I realise that mothers do this so their children need not suffer stigmatisation, but personally I do not think that the children should be sheltered within a Lesbian community because the children will grow up thinking that the world or the rest of society is like that community when in fact it is not. Therefore the child is not really getting a realistic view of society, despite the fact that society's views and ideals may be "all wrong". Wolf suggests that Lesbian mothers try to be especially loving and supportive to their children within the bounds of the family, or as one Lesbian mother put it "our home is a kind of haven from the ugliness of the outside world" (1979, p. 153). While I sympathise and empathise with this view, we cannot keep children cocooned from the "ugly world" because they are bound to discover it for themselves when they grow up and experience their own life at University or at work.

The Lesbian mother is in a marginal position from society's central core because she is generally considered to be a negative influence on her own children. Society also argues that male children in the Lesbian family need an appropriate male role model which cannot be provided for in the Lesbian family. However, the Lesbian is also in an ambiguous position in the Lesbian community for three reasons. First, because of the Lesbian mother's association with the father of her children, others in the Lesbian community criticise her as not being a "real" Lesbian. Second, many radical Lesbian feminists who are ideologically committed to be separate from men, say that they will take the responsibility for raising a girl child, but will relinquish the care of a boy to an appropriate male adult to bring him up. Therefore, these women who prefer not to care for their male children, stigmatise Lesbian mothers that look after their own children regardless of their sex. This stigmatisation works both ways, of course, as these Lesbian mothers condemn others for rejecting their male children. Finally, Lesbian mothers are also condemned or not given

any support from feminists who rejected the institution of motherhood and in having children as a solution to the destruction of male hegemony (Rich, 1980). I cannot help but feel that this particular aspect of being a Lesbian mother is central due to the shifts in role expectations between Lesbian mothers and Lesbian feminists.

In conclusion, the struggle for a Lesbian to have a life in a family of her choice with a partner and her children is still one determined by tradition. Such tradition and socialisation have a firm grasp upon the majority of these women and affect their Lesbian practice. Throughout this essay, the major struggles in regard to the ideologies of the Church, the State and the family have been outlined. The lack of social and emotional support from radical feminists and voluntarily childless Lesbian feminists for the Lesbian mother have also been discussed. I found this last point to be particularly disappointing as I believed that all Lesbians would be supportive of each other, if only in the sharing of their common devaluation by the majority of society. It is therefore obvious that many vital changes need to occur within the heterosexual as well as the Lesbian community if the Lesbian family is to exist, without stigmatisation, in peace and harmony within our society.

## References

- Dynes, W. (Ed.). (1990). **Encyclopedia of homosexuality**. Chicago: St. James Press.
- Ettorre, E.M. (1980). **Lesbians, women and society**. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Gordon, T. (1990). **Feminist mothers**. London: Macmillan Education.
- Kelly, E. (1980). Sociological aspects of family life: The fictitious family. In J. Krupinski and A. Stoller (Eds.). **The family in the Australia: Social, demographic and psychological aspects**. (pp. 18-38). Sydney: Permagon Press.
- Macklin, E.D. and Rubin, R.H. (1983). **Contemporary families and alternative lifestyles. Handbook on research and theory**. Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian experience. **Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society**, 5, 631-660.

- Talbot, D. (1985). **Homosexual women and men in Australian and New Zealand**. Perth: The Gay Counselling Service.
- Wolf, D.G. (1979). **The lesbian community**. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Zinn, M.B. and Eitzen, D.S. (1990). **Diversity in families**. New York: Harper and Row.

## Essay Seven: Only a Housewife? Housework and the Ideology of the Home. Angela Moore

*The ideology and roles described in the previous essays creates an environment where woman's place is in the home and that private world is her responsibility. In this personal account, Angela Moore reflects on her life and that of her mother and grandmother as 'homemakers' and sets that against the historical context of the ideology of 'home'.*

In our society, housework — those essential maintenance chores that help to meet Maslow's first hierarchy of needs for a comfortable physical environment (cited in Tyson, 1989, p. 52) — is carried out by women. Why should this be so, when the only people who are **incapable** of cleaning, washing, cooking and child care may be the frail, elderly, people with disabilities or tiny children themselves? Why are women expected to be satisfied with what can be a stultifying existence without mental stimulation or companionship? What is it about this work that has made women describe themselves disparagingly as "only a housewife?" Why are women made to feel guilty if they prefer paid work outside the home instead of full time motherhood? Why are women expected to be the nurturers and emotional props to their husbands and children, and who does this service for them?

This paper undertakes a historical analysis from a socialist feminist perspective of the social pressures that construct housework. As I was born and brought up in England, I will explore the history of that country as it applies to women's place in society, and will use the experiences of my grandmother, mother and myself to illustrate my argument.

\* \* \*

The lives of all women were changed forever by the Industrial Revolution (Oakley, 1984; French, 1985; de Beauvoir, 1947). Prior to the mid 18th century, working class women worked with their husbands at family businesses, or had their own occupations such as spinning, weaving or laundering which were carried out in the home. The whole family could be employed by the upper classes as servants or labourers. At this time, there was no clear distinction between what the women produced or did to earn money and the household maintenance tasks they performed (Arnold and Burr, 1985, p. 144). Children were expected to start earning money toward the family's subsistence by the time they were about five years old. Parents could mind the younger children as they worked and train the older ones in the family business. There was no expectation that the father's earnings alone would be



able to support the family financially and if women and children could not subsist on their own earnings, they were more likely to be supported by their parish (Oakley, 1984, p. 42).

With the advent of factories for the spinning and weaving of textiles, the old cottage industries became obsolete. At the beginning of industrialisation, whole families went to work in the new trades. In this way, parents could still care for their children and could treat them as apprentices in the old way (Oakley, 1984, p. 37). As England became more and more industrialised, people left the countryside and their agricultural pursuits to become factory workers. Cheap and substandard housing was erected in the towns and cities to accommodate this influx but there was much overcrowding and such poor sanitation that disease was common. Added to this were the appalling work conditions in the factories and mines where men, women and children of all ages were expected to work at least ten hours per day seven days a week for very little remuneration (French, 1985). These conditions were of great concern to the upper and middle classes, not so much because they thought the working class should not be worked so hard but because they were concerned such conditions might spark a revolt in England similar to the French Revolution.

An evangelical movement started about this time aimed at the abolition of slavery and the "moral reformation of the family." This movement commenced by instilling middle class values to the working class to prevent another class war (Arnold and Burr, 1985, p. 152). The values promoted the idea that if women were not involved in paid work, they could act as their husbands' spiritual advisers when they came home tired and worn from their labours. As part of the reformers' endeavours, the number of hours that women and children could work was gradually decreased and the concept of a family wage was introduced to enable the family unit to be supported by the father's earnings alone. This was bitterly resisted at first until men realised that if women were to be paid less than they were for the same work, employers would favour the employment of women and the men would lose their jobs (Oakley, 1984). From then on, male factory workers were in favour of women being encouraged to stay at home. As children were also no longer being employed, they needed someone to care for and educate them so mothers were encouraged to take on this responsibility (Arnold and Burr, 1985).

Middle class women, whose husbands had become wealthy due to industrialisation, lived lives of leisured luxury. They were responsible for the

---

management of their household staff of domestic servants who were in plentiful supply for most of the Victorian era. Even though these women seemed rich, they had no control over their wealth, as they were economically dependent on their husbands (Summers, 1975). These women embodied the myth of the division of labour by sex that women are naturally housewives whose role is essential for the survival of society (Oakley, 1984). They were seen as the civilising influence over the men in their families, to the point where a mawkish poem was written about women as being "the Angel in the House" (Patmore<sup>1</sup> cited in French, 1985, p. 205). "On her fell the task of providing a haven and refuge for her family away from the cares of the world. On her fell also the role of shaper and guardian of morals" (Willis, 1980, p. 175). This ideology supported the "good" woman as not a sexual being, whereas a "bad" one was a concept which led to the dichotomy described by Anne Summers as "damned whores and God's police." Such an analysis applied in England as well as Australia as women could only be one or the other (Summers, 1975, p. 341). Some of these "good" women took it upon themselves to help the working class by visiting them and encouraging them in habits of cleanliness, morality and piety (Arnold and Burr, 1985). These charitable acts were not always successful where people lived in filthy slums with no running water. As Simone de Beauvoir so eloquently argued:

under impoverished conditions...the hovel remains a hovel in spite of a woman's sweat and tears...legions of women have only this endless struggle without victory over dirt (de Beauvoir, 1947, p. 470).

Women from prosperous families were also exhorted to train their female servants in habits of domestic economy and sober virtues so that "domestic service also spread middle-class values and notions of propriety into working class families" (Arnold and Burr, 1985, p. 147). After Louis Pasteur had formulated his "germ theory of disease" in 1857, girls were taught to scrub and scour to keep their homes spotlessly clean and, thus, disease free. This "provided a rationale for continuous cleaning of the home, in contrast with the pre-industrial practice of "spring-cleaning" (Arnold and Burr, 1985, p. 156). The adage "cleanliness is next to Godliness" was coined at about this time.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, compulsory education for both boys and girls was introduced, with the aim of producing citizens who could be inculcated with the same ideologies and purpose that motivated the ruling classes. By arguing that well educated women would raise their sons to

be better citizens, the idea that a more rounded education should be offered to girls gained favour (Spender, 1982b). When universal education was made law, different curricula were proposed for boys and girls attending government schools, based on the skills that it was thought they would need for their future lives. Girls were taught household management, cooking, sewing and laundering, as well as reading, writing and some of the more academic subjects (Spender, 1983).

The first of the infant welfare clinics was set up in Great Britain in 1899 to guide mothers in child care and good nutrition (Oakley, 1984). This was too late for the many intending recruits who were found unfit for the army at the outset of the Boer War which started in the same year. The committee set up by the government to find out the cause of this sorry state of affairs came to the preposterous conclusion that city mothers had failed in their duty to nourish and nurture their sons (Arnold and Burr, 1985).

The doctrine that women belong in the home never carried more conviction than when it is allied to 'proof' that women's activities outside the home are detrimental to the health and welfare of themselves, their families and the country as a whole (Oakley, 1985, p. 47)

While the wives of the aristocracy and middle class had not been obliged to work throughout Victorian times, it was not until the end of this era that working women also accepted the idea that it was a misfortune and a disgrace to work outside the home (Oakley, 1984). The depression in the world economy at this time also reinforced the notion that any available paid work outside the home should be reserved for men.

By the time my grandmother was married in 1905, all the social pressures to conform with middle class ideology that had been filtering down through the social strata during Victorian times were taken for granted as "natural". She was of the first generation of girls to attend a government school so had been inculcated with the ideology of the work ethic and the family wage, of the "poor but respectable" image, of the "ideal" wife and mother who did not work outside the family home. These were all considered the norm, not recent constructions. My maternal grandparents would be considered upper working class as they had both been apprenticed to trades; my grandfather as a dental instrument maker and my grandmother as a seamstress.<sup>2</sup> She left work as a matter of course on marriage. Although my grandmother had many more manufactured consumable items to buy than were available to women

a hundred years earlier, the daily physical labour required by her house and by the type of clothing worn demanded prodigious amounts of housework to be done.<sup>3</sup> I do not know whether or not she found her life satisfying but she would certainly have been very busy most of the time. As my grandparents shared their rented house with another young couple, she was not as isolated as women so often are.

This then was the world of my grandmother and the ideology of the housework and the home which she passed on to my mother and, through her, to me. There was little change to this view of women's role in the first half of the twentieth century. Except when women were needed to work in munitions factories and other male occupations during both the First and Second World Wars, they were expected to keep house and look after their husbands and children (Oakley, 1984). However, between the wars it became increasingly acceptable for married women to carry on working but to leave the workforce when they had children. My mother was married in 1936 and she left her job at that time because my father's work necessitated the move to a new location. She was very unhappy as she found the work of looking after a house for two adults was not enough to fill her days and she was socially isolated. Although my father was opposed to the idea, she took a part time job when the Second World War was imminent, not so much for the money as to fill up the lonely hours and have some companionship. I was born during the war so mother gave up her job to devote herself to child care.<sup>4</sup>

Although children's day nurseries were available to women during the Second World War to enable as many workers to be employed as possible, once the war was over, women were forcibly encouraged back into their homes to relinquish their jobs to the returning men (Oakley, 1984). This was accomplished through the media, not only by exhorting them that their rightful place was in the home, but also arguing that by using pseudo-scientific methods, they could create a haven for their men of which they could be proud (Friedan, 1963). It was also at this time that John Bowlby<sup>5</sup> announced the results of his research into maternal deprivation in infants (Eastman, 1989), which tended to scare women away from taking paid work outside the home.<sup>6</sup> As a young girl growing up at this time, I swallowed the prevailing ideology of home and family life, which was reinforced increasingly in the print and visual media. I was one of many who had my life mapped out as "school, job, meet 'Mr. Right', marry, have children and live 'happily ever after'" (Friedan, 1963, p. 63). There was no comprehension that this would not be a satisfying life, or that there would be many years to fill after the children were born, "the problem that has no name" (Ibid, p. 13).<sup>7</sup>

Unlike those American housewives Betty Friedan described, I could not make housework my life's work, but felt very guilty all the same when I neglected some of my chores or put them off until next day. As many women do, I thought there was something wrong with me, not the whole system (Ibid, p. 19). The dual roles of coping with the housework and child care can be detrimental to women's health, as "children need to compete with housework for the mother's attention" (Oakley, 1984, p. 217). My life did not improve until I returned to the workforce when my youngest child started school. Once I had money of my own and workmates with whom to interact, my self-esteem soared and I know I was a much better companion to my husband and a more interesting mother to my children. Many other women have had similar experiences and depression seems to be less evident in working women than in housewives (Faludi, 1991).

AC. It is still extremely difficult for women who want to work and have husbands and children too. While equal opportunity for women in the workplace is becoming a reality so that they receive equal pay and cannot be prevented from doing "men's work", the social reality has not kept pace and women are still expected to do all the maintenance work of the home and raising the children (Sokoloff, 1984). Instead of one job, they are expected to do two, or even three, if their work requires them to present a certain appearance which also entails considerable time and effort (Wolf, 1990). Even though more men appear to be willing to help around the house than was the case in the past, women still do most of the housework (Hartman, 1984). Thus, in spite of the efforts of the women's movement, housework is still regarded as women's responsibility and men's participation in it is dependent on the goodwill of the individual man.

\* \* \*

done

Socialist feminism is an expansion of the theories of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels<sup>8</sup> which attempted to explain the oppression and exploitation of the working class under capitalism (Rubin, 1984), though it does have some major points of departure from these theories.<sup>9</sup> Socialist feminists argue that sex segregation in the workplace tends to force women into a subordinate position at home because they earn less than their husbands, thus reinforcing male dominance as well as capitalism. They realised that the reproduction of labour power does not explain why women do the domestic work and that the Marxist analysis of capitalism does not explain why women are oppressed (Rubin, 1984). While Juliet Mitchell and Shulamith Firestone had many differences of opinion, they did agree on the relation between women's

oppression and the ideological association of women with the private sphere (Cited in Eisenstein, 1984, p. 19).

Women's work in the home is of as much concern to socialist feminists as is their paid work in the labour force. Women are socialised into the primary roles of wife and mother and they can be moved into and out of the workforce as required and usually resigned in accepting low paid and menial jobs. Being subordinate in the private sphere leads to subordination in the public sphere. By dividing work according to gender, giving better paid and higher status jobs to men, women were forced to become dependent on men financially and as they did all the housework, became their husbands' personal servants (Hartman, 1984). As women had no legal status once they were married, they became totally subordinate to their husbands (French, 1986).

The sexual division of labour is also the underpinning of sexual subcultures in which men and women experience life differently: it is the material base of male power which is exercised...not just in not doing housework and in securing superior employment, but psychologically as well (Hartman, 1984, p. 179).

A further means of oppression for women is that because housework is unpaid, it is not considered as real work (Oakley, 1974; Spender, 1983; Eastman, 1989; French, 1992). This is why so many women have described themselves as "only" housewives as if they were not real or important people. While feminists maintain that housework is domestic servitude and labour exploitation, both male and female traditionalists claim that it is a freely chosen occupation, where individual skills can be exercised (Oakley, 1974). Although some women concede this point, they realise that housework is their responsibility and that men do not see it as something they are obliged to do.

When the variety of tasks undertaken by women in the home is considered — cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing, gardening, nursing, chauffeuring, managing money and being "on-call" twenty-four hours a day for child care — the cost of employing professionals to carry out these tasks would be staggering (Scott, 1984, p. 315). Added to this is the nurturing of the family's emotional health and welfare which cannot be supplied externally and on which society relies to socialise and civilise future generations. These services are priceless, yet in most Western cultures, being a housewife has virtually no status at all.

In fact if the job weren't considered 'women's work', there is little doubt that its challenges, its variety and its flexibility would appeal to many men (Scott, 1984, p. 316).

Even where socialism has been practiced and legal restrictions for women removed, there is no effort made to teach men that they should share the responsibility for housework and raising their children (French, 1992). Thus, the freedom and equality as promised by Marxist theory to the oppressed has done nothing to alleviate the lot of women who now shoulder the double burden of paid work and housekeeping.

One way in which capitalism has affected women directly is in determining her as the consumer. It is she who buys food, clothing and household equipment for her home and family, even if she does not do paid work. Slick and compelling advertising campaigns have been aimed directly at her through the print and electronic media to persuade her that she will be a better housewife and mother if she buys this or that brand of washing powder, margarine or refrigerator (Faludi, 1991; Friedan, 1963; Oakley, 1974). As Ann Oakley argues:

Industrialisation has had these lasting consequences: separation of the man from the intimate routines of domestic life; the economic dependence of women and children on men; the isolation of housework and child care from other work (1974, p. 59).

Men and women are more alike than they are different so the imposed gender identities into which they are socialised "far from being an expression of natural differences...is the suppression of natural similarities" (Wittig, 1984, p. 165). The society which feminists wish to create will recognise that all work has worth, that all people need nurturance and the interdependence of men and women is liberating rather than shameful.

## References

- Beauvoir, S. de (1949). *The second sex*. London: Picador Classics.
- Eastman, M. (1989). *Family: The vital factor*. Melbourne: Collins Dove.
- Eisenstein, H. (1984). *Contemporary feminist thought*. London: Unwin.
-

- Faludi, S. (1991). **Backlash**. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Faulkner, W. and Arnold, E. (Eds). (1985). **Smothered by invention. Technology in women's lives**. London: Pluto Press.
- French, M. (1985). **Beyond power: On women, men and morals**. London: Cardinal/Macdonald.
- French, M. (1992). **The war against women**. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Friedan, B. (1963). **The feminine mystique**. London: Penguin.
- Grieve, N. and Grimshaw, P. (Eds). (1981). **Australian women. Feminist perspectives**. Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Jaggar, A.M. and Rothenberg, P. Sirval. (1984). **Feminist frameworks**. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Oakley, A. (1974). **Housewife**. London: Penguin Books.
- Spender, D. (1982a). **Women of ideas and what men have done to them**. London: Pandora.
- Spender, D. (1982b). **Invisible women**. London: The Women's Press.
- Spender, L. (1983). **Intruders on the rights of men**. London: Pandora Press/Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Summers, A. (1975). **Damned whores and God's police**. Ringwood: Penguin.
- Tyson, T. (1989). **Working with groups**. South Melbourne: MacMillan Education.
- Windschuttle, E. (Ed). (1980). **Women, class and history. Feminist perspectives in Australia 1788-1978**. Melbourne: Fontana/Collins.
- Wolf, N. (1990). **The beauty myth**. London: Vintage.



- <sup>1</sup> Coventry Patmore (1823-1896). English poet whose *The Angel in the House* (1854) gave a name to the "ideal woman".
- <sup>2</sup> She worked for a large furniture manufacturer in London, sewing curtains and loose covers in a large workroom with twenty or thirty other women. She worked from 8am to 6pm from Monday to Friday, and 8am to 1pm on Saturday. When she started at the age of fourteen, she was earning seven shillings per week. When she left she was earning the princely sum of fourteen shillings per week.
- <sup>3</sup> Nana produced six babies between 1906 and 1916 though only four survived, three girls and a boy. The fashion was for little girls to be dressed in white broderie Anglaise or gingham dresses with starched white pinafores and black button sided boots. All of the children's garments were homemade as was most of the household linen such as sheets, pillow cases and bedspreads, which were also white. This made a great deal of washing every week, some by hand, but most boiled in the copper, rinsed in cold water, put through a blue rinse and finally starched, being put through the mangle or hand wrung after each process. It then all had to be hung out to dry in the garden, keeping an eye out in case it looked like rain, to enable it all to be brought indoors again, to be dried on the clothes-horse. The next day was employed in ironing everything with a flat iron that had to be heated on the kitchen range. This monster had to be taken apart each week, all the parts rubbed with emery paper and blacklead, and the whole reassembled. The next job was to clean the dresser together with all four shelves of crockery which had become covered with the dust created by these endeavours. The floors were all swept daily and scrubbed once a week, and the carpets cleaned with a hand brush. Every week, the brass stair rails were removed and polished, the door knocker burnished and the door step holystoned every day. On top of this, Nana prepared four meals per day, breakfast, dinner, tea and supper.
- <sup>4</sup> While mum did not have to contend with starched pinafores or blacklead stoves, she still had to boil the laundry, and put it through a mangle or handwring everything. There was no hot water system in our house, so bath water was heated in the wash-boiler and taken into the bathroom in buckets full. It is no wonder that we had baths only once per week! Mum also had to contend with the shortages that war brought. It must have been very difficult to make nourishing and interesting meals out of the rations allowed, so people "dug for victory" which meant growing vegetables instead of grass and flowers in their gardens. As clothing was also rationed the populace was exhorted to "make do and mend". My mother found it very depressing to not have anything new. The worst time was just after the war in the winter of 1947. It was the coldest weather in many years, coal was in very short supply so there was little to heat homes and the power stations had to conserve what was available by cutting power every day on a rotational basis. My mother heard of the availability of some coal eggs (made with coal dust), but there was no delivery service, so she walked three miles with the old baby pram, filled this up and pushed and dragged it back home in the snow. Somehow she managed a hot meal every day by preparing food like stews and steamed puddings which she cooked on the electric stove until the power was cut, then she would transfer the whole lot to the top of a small paraffin heater. All this was achieved in addition to the usual work involved in caring for a small child and a new baby.
- <sup>5</sup> John Bowlby (1907- ). English sociologist and doctor whose unsponsored study in 1948 of homeless children in London was published in 1952 as *Child Care and the Growth of Love*.

- <sup>6</sup> Once my sister went to school, my mother did take a job as a school secretary but she could do this with a clear conscience as she was always at home when we were.
- <sup>7</sup> The one thing I was totally unprepared for was the terrible loneliness I experienced after I left work to have my first son. Lacking adult companionship and then having no money of my own to be able to go anywhere or do anything much outside the home made me very miserable. When my husband came home from work, he was often the only adult I had seen all day but he did not understand that I wanted to talk while he just wanted to relax and watch the news. I gradually realised that I was no longer interesting. What did I have to talk about except boring things like washing or cleaning? I became very unhappy and depressed, especially as my husband could not understand my distress. I had two beautiful boys that I loved dearly but their wants and needs could not occupy my intellect all the hours of the day so I used to read a great deal. When the opportunity arose to emigrate to Australia, I thought a new start in a different country might improve my marriage and would certainly be better for my sons. However, all I did was move my problems to a new environment and having two more children did not improve matters. Looking back on this time, I see that I was probably clinically depressed.
- <sup>8</sup> Karl Marx (1818-82) and Frederick Engels (1820-1885). German economists and socialist political theorists who lived in England and were able to observe the impact of industrialisation at first hand.
- <sup>9</sup> Marx seemed to be relatively unconcerned with gender, seeing people as peasants, workers or capitalists rather than men and women. Engels did distinguish between the sexual division of labour and family relationships (Burton, 1981), when he spoke of the production and reproduction of labour and he recognised that humans had more needs than just shelter, food and warmth. (Rubin, p. 158).

**Part Three:**  
**Issues**

---

## Essay Eight: The Impact of Domestic Violence on the Psychology of Women.

---

Megan Dawson

---

*Domestic violence in the family challenges the stereotypes of home as a "haven". Megan Dawson clarifies the reality of the violent world in which some women live and the impact of that violence on their psychological well-being.*

Domestic violence is not a new phenomenon. It is one that has been part of women's lives for a long time, is extremely damaging to women and can result in murder. It is my aim in this paper to discuss the impact of domestic violence on the psychology of women. My analysis of domestic violence will be confined to the violence inflicted upon women by their intimate male partner:

Wife assault involves the intent by the husband to intimidate, either by threat or by use of physical force on the person's wife or property. The purpose of the assault is to control her behaviour by the inducement of fear (Sinclair, 1985, p. 15).

Domestic violence does not just refer to physical abuse; it can also take the form of emotional, sexual and economic abuse.

\* \* \*

It is almost impossible to determine the extent of the problem, as most incidents go unreported and occur usually in the privacy of the home (Sinclair, 1985, p. 18). Domestic violence is the most common form of assault in Australia. Besides traffic duties, it occupies the greatest proportion of police officers' time. On average, 25 women per week apply to the Perth Central Court for restraining orders to protect them from violent or threatening partners or ex-partners. Over a recent nine month period, 11% of the total calls to the Crisis Care Unit in Perth concerned domestic violence (WA Office of the Family, 1992). American studies have concluded that up to one third of marriages will experience at least one violent episode and 3% to 4% of women in heterosexual relationships are assaulted by their partners (Department of Community Services Training Kit, (DCS), 1989).

Physical abuse is the most obvious form to identify. It can range from punching, kicking, slapping, using knives, guns or household items as weapons against the victim, to damaging pets or property. It is abuse that causes bodily

harm. It usually increases in severity and frequency over time and can end in murder (Sinclair, 1985). Sexual abuse includes any forced sexual activities. It also includes flaunting details of extra-marital affairs, excessive jealousy and sexual accusations. Usually, sexual abuse occurs alongside emotional and physical abuse. Emotional abuse includes repeated humiliation and "put downs", threats of violence or homicide and behaviour intended to terrorise or completely demoralise the victim. An abuser may isolate his spouse from family and friends and deprive her of her necessary needs. Emotional abuse wears down the victim and the anxiety associated with living with constant fear and unpredictability can be enormous.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of domestic violence can be considered in the framework of a cycle. Ian McDonald, Director of the Marriage Guidance Council of Queensland, outlines a classic pattern with five clear phases.

- The **Build-up Phase** — a period of developing tension and unresolved disagreement in the relationship.
- The **Stand-Over Phase** during which the male's belief of his right to control his partner's life becomes evident through the use of threats and verbal assault. His anger is maintained until there is an "explosion", a violence incident.
- The **Remorse Phase** which is characterised by justification and minimisation of the preceding assault by the male. His spouse will probably feel guilt due to her internalisation of the verbal assaults directed at her during the standover phase.
- The **Buy Back or Pursuit Phase** involves the male pursuing his partner with gifts and promises in an attempt to woo her back to the relationship. Failing this, he will declare his emotional dependence on her, that is, that he cannot live without her. In extreme situations, the buy back phase can become overtly life threatening. "I will find you and kill you/ or the children and/or myself".
- The **Honeymoon Phase** during which the couple cling to each other, often in social isolation. This period may be a time of real intimacy but it is a honeymoon on eggshells. Eventually, the scenario changes to the build up phase and the cycle continues (McDonald, 1989).

McDonald states that as the cycle is repeated, the assaults increase in severity and frequency with the cycle being short circuited in time and the buy back and honeymoon phases being eliminated. At this point, lives are in danger (1989, p. 8). From the cycle of violence, it can be seen that women are confused by the changes in their partners and by their own personal responses to those changes (DCS, 1989). However, the pattern of the cycle is also useful as a means of empowering abused women as once they can predict their partner's behaviour, they can begin to take some control of their lives.

The causes of domestic violence are very complex. Quite often the boundaries between cause and effect become blurred. Janet Hyde (1991) reviews four theoretical approaches to an understanding of domestic violence. The first, based on psychology promotes the notion of pathology in either the abuser or the spouse. The reported and suspected incidence of domestic violence suggests that it does not just occur in families with psychologically disturbed members. However it is unfortunate that this is just the view that appears to predominate in our society.

The second approach is that of "learned helplessness" which has its roots in learning theory. This theory proposes that women are socialised into being dependent, passive and helpless. Being abused as an adult reinforces a woman's helplessness and explains why women stay in violent relationships or return to them after leaving. While recognising the powerful impact of gender role socialisation, learned helplessness theory does not take into consideration the economic, social and cultural factors at the centre of domestic violence. Nor does it recognise that sometimes women stay because they fear for their lives. Crime statistics bear out the reality of this fear. Sociological theory takes into account the societal view that appears to sanction violence by husbands against wives. A 1987 Australian study of attitudes to domestic violence showed that 19% of men and women considered it acceptable for a man to use physical force against his female partner under some circumstances (DCS, 1989).<sup>2</sup> Sociologists also analyse domestic violence in the context of gender role socialisation. Feminist theorists argue that domestic violence occurs and is allowed to continue as a result of the power imbalance that exists between men and women (Women's Refuge Group of WA (WRG), 1993). The power imbalance serves as a rationale for a man to "discipline" his wife while domestic violence effectively perpetuates the dominance of men over women (Hyde, 1991, p. 351).

Feminism also acknowledges the historical and institutional oppression of women and that individual experience of wife assault is located in a social

---

and political context. Some authors (Regan, 1987; Sinclair, 1985; DCS, 1989) recognise the different "layers" involved when trying to analyse the causes of domestic violence. These layers include the personal or individual factors, community responses, institutional reinforcers (such as the law) and cultural beliefs. It would seem that to develop strategies that challenge and prevent domestic violence, a multi-level assessment of the issue is imperative. It is not the main purpose of this paper to explore each of these layers. However, the following examples of assumptions, attitudes and practices in Australian life provide the context with which to view domestic violence in this country. These assumptions include that:

- family life is sacred and private;
- the history is the rule of thumb;
- men should be at the pinnacle of hierarchies;
- masculinity equals physical power and dominance;
- problems can be solved using physical force.

The Duluth (Minnesota) Method (Brinegar, 1992) clearly highlights the contrast between the psychological causes of domestic violence. For example, that 'men batter because they can't handle stress/express their feeling because they are insecure/jealous' and the widespread culturally accepted forms of oppression that are used against women, people of colour, homosexuals, poor people and other oppressed groups. That is, they demonstrate the similarities between the violence used on women and that used against other groups. If we address men's psychological issues, would we have any impact on the prevalence of domestic violence?

What then are the psychological effects on women who experience repetitious domestic violence? Besides the physical impact of the bruises and the lacerations, the psychological impact is likely to be profoundly damaging. The woman involved is likely to have very high stress levels, have attempted suicide, have high levels of anxiety, depression and psychiatric illness, have increased rates of substance abuse and be socially isolated (WRG, 1993). Related to the effects of such violence is the question: why do women stay in abusive relationships?

Deborah Sinclair (1985) proposes that there are three aspects that overlap to keep a woman trapped in a violent relationship: societal beliefs; accessibility of resources and the response of the community; and the psychological experience of the woman. The notions of the traditional female role, the privacy and sanctity of the home, the ideal two-parent family model

and victim-blaming are all societal structures that contribute to the maintenance of abusive relationships. Without resources such as affordable, adequate housing, employment, child care facilities and other support services, the future for a woman leaving her abusive husband is a daunting and overwhelming one.<sup>3</sup>

Fear is probably the strongest emotion felt by the abused woman. Fear colours her every waking moment, manifesting itself in a variety of ways. She lives with the constant threat of death or serious harm to herself, significant others, people who help her, pets or property. In efforts to protect other peoples' lives, she contains the violence to her own immediate realm, thereby putting the needs of others before her own. This self sacrificial behaviour stems from women's socialisation in the role of nurturer and carer. In order to be able to live with this fear, assaulted women often tend to minimise the abuse. This operates as a major defence mechanism. It may mean that the woman does not talk about the violence, fearing that it may only make matters worse for herself: "Will I be believed? Will I be blamed?" The gap between the popular beliefs about domestic violence and the reality promotes minimisation. For example, "but he didn't hit me". Shame and embarrassment also cause minimisation.

Due to the nature of domestic violence, the abused woman is often socially isolated. She keeps quiet for fear of reprisals from her partner and due to her own shame. The abuser is also likely to tend to limit her contact with her friends and family. Such isolation means she has little potential to grow as a person — she has no avenues for realistic feedback. It also increases her dependence on her partner and she is forced to accept his definition of her self worth. After years and years of repeated abuse, a woman may take on a state of learned helplessness. Her attempts to control, avoid or escape violence have been unsuccessful, therefore leaving her almost paralysed. She feels completely worn down and perceives there is absolutely nothing she can do to change her life. Her depression may lead to a loss of a will to live. Many abused women feel a sense of ambivalence about their relationships as their partner is not violent all of the time. An abused woman may see herself as inferior and in time come to see herself as deserving bad treatment. She will believe there is something wrong with her, thereby internalising her own oppression:

The woman who has little support in challenging the traditional female role is most vulnerable to remaining in an abusive relationship. The greater her internalisation of her oppression,



the longer it will take her to overcome her victimization (Sinclair, 1985, p. 34).

Obviously, repeated abuse and victimisation leads to a battered self esteem. A "woman's sense of worthiness, self confidence and belief in her abilities [are] all damaged" (1985, p. 34). She feels humiliated that the man she has chosen to be her partner has beaten her. This can be considered to be the ultimate betrayal. Again, the longer and more severe the abuse, the poorer a woman's self image will be. Failed attempts at leaving just serve to reinforce this.

As the cycle of violence illustrates, there are periods of closeness and tenderness. The woman wants the "violence to end, not the marriage" (Sinclair, 1985, p. 34) and loves him and hopes desperately that he will change. Leaving him also poses difficulties of a new kind — loneliness, poverty, single parenthood — which terrify her. Given the messages intrinsic in many of our societal institutions and popular culture, it is not surprising that the abused woman believes the myths about domestic violence. These messages, reinforced with brainwashing in the home, "you are to blame for all the problems in this family", promote the internalisation of blame by the assaulted woman.

Sinclair (1985) makes the point that when contemplating the abused woman, it is more helpful to consider her as a courageous person, surviving against incredible odds. By asking why she does not leave implies there is something wrong with **her**. The Duluth Method considers the "ways women internalize the messages of their abusers, the system that supports the abuser and the culture that subtly and blatantly dehumanizes women" (Mann, 1987, p. 41). It draws on the work of Adrienne Rich, who identified four forms of self destruction among women living in a society that oppresses them. These characteristics are relevant to all women, not just those who have been abused:

- **self trivialization.** We put ourselves down;
- **horizontal hostility.** We see other women as competitors and we find fault with other women;
- **approval seeking from those more powerful than we are;**
- **misplaced compassion.** We are more tuned into our partner's needs, despite his abuse. That is, we take better care of him than ourselves.

Each of these behaviours demonstrates how women internalise "woman hating". As already highlighted, the causes of domestic violence are complex and so require sophisticated multi-levelled strategies to address them. A summary of the traditional helping profession's response to domestic violence identified them as:

- privatising the problem by locating it within the family realm;
- domestic violence, that is, seeing it as a manifestation of pathology;
- normalising violence in the home by not responding with appropriate alarm;
- "victimising" women who have been abused;
- the situation, that is perceiving men and women to have equal power in relationships and therefore sharing responsibility for the problem.

These indictments probably summarise the mainstream response to issues of domestic violence until recent years. It has taken the Women's Refuge Movement and feminist activists and academics to bring the issue into the public arena. Intervention in the area of domestic violence ranges from very practical but fundamental support such as providing abused women and their children with safe refuge, legal advice, vocational counselling and child care, to individual therapy, legislative and institutional changes and community education. In **Breaking Free from Domestic Violence**, Jerry Brinegar offers a "healing" oriented, individualised approach to the problem. He suggests (personal) empowerment, recovering and emphasises professional support. He argues that:

whether you are being abused, doing the abusing, or both, you are not necessarily a bad person. You probably are repeating what you learned and have not developed alternatives for handling conflict and stress. The most important thing you can do is to get help to stop the violence (1992, p. 60).

Bonnie Mann (1987) provides a critique of conventional therapy with its roots in psychiatry:

The search for personal empowerment and therapeutic health, hides the reality that the world must be changed if women's lives are to be lived with dignity (Mann, 1987, p. 113).

She advocates that therapeutic ideology with its emphasis on healing, individual treatment, feelings, support groups, assertion training and the psychological self, does not challenge the status quo that sanctions domestic violence. She believes that the therapeutic approach objectifies feelings, separates women from their pain and therefore from each other (I have pain rather than I am in pain). If perception is reality and everyone's reality is okay, then surely this legitimates the abuser? By focussing so exclusively on feelings, therapists ignore the very situations that give rise to those feelings. Exposing one's intimate feelings is seen as courageous, but this may only increase a woman's vulnerability as it leaves her open to attack and "promotes the habit of playing the victim" (Mann, 1987, p. 108). In this model, the need for social change is forgotten.

In contrast, the Duluth Model (1987) based on both feminist theory and the teachings and experiences of Brazilian activist Paulo Friere,<sup>4</sup> promotes liberation from domestic violence via a radical education process. It overtly aims to politicize women so that they may tackle their own oppression. In order to do this, understanding of the issues must take place at three levels, the personal, the institutional and the cultural. Hyde (1991) supports this position by arguing that it is the work of women in refuges and through peer support that provides the most successful treatment for assaulted women.

I would like to conclude on a personal note. Through the process of preparing this paper I have felt deep regret that I did not have a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding domestic violence in my past work as a helping professional. It was because I did not appreciate the enormous and devastating impact on the psychology of women who experience domestic violence that I was not able to offer or facilitate any real liberation for them. Instead I felt personally frustrated. I have also felt a tremendous sense of abhorrence at the stories I have read and heard in recent weeks when researching this paper. In my own family, my work and my community life, I now feel compelled to challenge the myths surrounding the issue and speak out for all women.

## References

- Brinegar, J. (1992). **Breaking free from domestic violence.** Minnesota: CompCare Publishers.
- Department for Community Services (WA). (1989). **Domestic violence: Training the trainer kit.** Perth: State Government Publishers.
- Hyde, J. (1991). **Half the human experience: The psychology of women.** Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath.
- Mann, B. (1987). Working with battered women. Radical education or therapy? In K. Regan (Ed.). **In our best interest: A process for social and personal change.** (pp. 104-116). Duluth, Minn.: Minnesota Program Development Inc.
- Office of the Family (1992). **The background to the family violence legislation.** Perth: State Government Publishers.
- Regan, K. (Ed.). (1987). **In our best interest: A process for social and personal change.** Duluth, Minn.: Minnesota Program Development Inc.
- Women's Refuge Group of WA (1990). **Working with women and children in refuges.** Perth: WRG of WA.

---

<sup>1</sup> For a good analysis of the relationship between power and control in domestic violence and the range of behaviours and tactics used by abusers see K. Regan (Ed.). 1987.

<sup>2</sup> As recently as early 1993, a member of the judiciary in South Australia sanctioned a husband to use "rougher than usual" physical force with his wife when seeking sex.

<sup>3</sup> Sinclair (1985) elaborates comprehensively on the psychological experience of the assaulted woman.

<sup>4</sup> Paolo Friere (1921- ). Brazilian born educator and activist whose writings have influenced not only education but the struggle for freedom and national development in the Third World.

---

---

**Essay Nine: A Family Problem: Society's Secret.  
A Socialist-Feminist Analysis of Incest and  
Child Sexual Abuse.**

---

***Robin Walshe***

*The family as a private sphere has long been the tenet of both religious and State ideologies. In this essay, Robin Walshe exposes the myth of the family as "haven" and argues that such privacy has been taken to an extreme where society will not discuss and, in fact, often hides the reality of abuse of children.*

My decision to research and write on the subject of incest and child sexual abuse was influenced by stories such as Bridget's and Peter's. Bridget is five years old. In a lot of ways she is a normal, vivacious child. Bridget is a 'bed wetter'; she may wet her bed two or three times a night. She also has wetting "accidents" during the day. Someone said she was lazy and just couldn't be bothered telling anyone when she wanted to go to the toilet. This is not the case. Bridget has a damaged bladder. Bridget has little bruises over her arms and legs and bite marks appear from time to time. Bridget does this to herself, it is called self mutilation. Bridget has been sexually used and abused since she was only a few months old. In some ways Bridget may turn out to be one of the luckier ones as she has been removed from that damaging environment but there is no guarantee she will not be abused again even though her story is known.

There have been many cases which have shown that children in foster homes are not necessarily safe from continued abuse. Society assumes that families who take on foster children are above reproach and will be given a status that is unrealistic just as we give 'the family' the status of a safe haven. This, obviously, is not always the case.

I was told the story of Peter, another child sexual abuse victim, some time ago and the frustration of it has stayed with me every since. Peter had spent several years in foster homes and had been sexually abused while in the care of foster parents. After many years of anguish, Peter decided to take the perpetrator of his abuse to court. Days before the court hearing the male perpetrator committed suicide. Peter was left feeling frustrated and once again a victim. Even though the perpetrator had admitted to several accounts of sexual abuse of children and, in particular, to the abuse of Peter, no more could be done for Peter or any other victims of this man — he was dead. All they could do was watch as family, friends and associates gathered for the funeral of a man who on the surface appeared to be a pillar of society, a man actively involved in youth and sporting clubs. This man was being sent to his

---

final resting place a hero. The message his victims were hearing was the same one society has always given victims of child sexual abuse: "we don't believe you". Feeling frustrated, angry and wondering how many other innocent victims of child sexual abuse were unable to tell their stories, for whatever reasons, I wanted to know why it was that the topic of incest/child sexual abuse brings about such reluctance to hear and believe the victims.

In researching and reading for this paper, as my anger and other emotions surfaced, I was very tempted to take a radical stance and support a separate society for men and women so that children could be protected. However, as I read further and put some focus into my research, I realised that this solution was not for me. It was much too simple and unrealistic and almost like running away from the situation. I also had to recognise that women abuse their children too. While I felt the "problem" was within the family, it did not occur in all families. Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence to suggest the incidence of child sexual abuse is under reported and as this abuse happens within the family setting, this is where I needed to look. I therefore had conflicting opinions about the feminist perspective required — either radical or socialist. However I have come to believe that it is a combination of patriarchy, capitalism and the State and the way in which these combine and intertwine to influence and uphold the institution of the family and the family's right to privacy, that condones the silence surrounding incest.

It is my intention in this paper to look at the way history has shaped our thinking, as a society, to believe in the institution that is "the family" and the ideology that surrounds the notion that the family is a "safe haven". Since the advent of Christianity, I believe man has oppressed and controlled women. It is my view and I discuss this in more detail below, that organised religion, through the churches, has more than anything else, historically upheld man's assumed right to exercise sexual satisfaction from the women in his household.

\* \* \*

Sexual abuse is first and foremost an act of violence, hatred and aggression. There are many categories and definitions explaining sexual abuse of children. Incest is an act of aggression imposed on a child by an adult family member. It can be manual or genital sexual contact or other sexual behaviour imposed on that child. This behaviour results in emotional, physical or sexual trauma for that child. Fortune (1983) explains that while rape is defined as an assaultative situation in which physical force is used, incest or child sexual abuse is much more coercive. The child may experience confusion

in his/her emotions, feeling loved and receiving affection from an adult they trust, combined with a sense of powerlessness and terror.

Paula: With my father, I was the aggressor. He'd come in my bed and cuddle me and eat me; then he'd threaten me not to tell. He loved me very much. He just had a sickness. He was a good man in every other way. He went to church and worked six days a week. Maybe I did go up to my father and cuddle him, but I was a child; you don't make anything of it (1981, p. 87).

This confused state in the child encourages self blame and can result in the child taking no action to stop the abuse. Children do not consent to advances made by adults. Children are powerless in their position within the family and they have not yet developed an understanding or an ability to make a free and fully conscious response to that adult (Justice and Justice, 1979; Herman, 1981; Fortune, 1983; Kempt and Kempt, 1984; Butler, 1978). A recent and local State government program acknowledges that to define child sexual abuse and neglect is not easy and suggests that cultural differences in child rearing must be respected (Information and Awareness Programme on Child Sexual Abuse, 1993). In 1987, the Commonwealth Ministerial Child Abuse Review Panel defined child abuse and neglect as follows:

A situation wherein a parent(s) or other person(s) having the care, custody, control or charge of a child inflicts or allows to be inflicted on the child physical injury or gross deprivation which causes or creates substantial risk of death, disfigurement, impairment of physical or emotional health or development or creates or allows to be created a substantial risk of such injury other than by accidental means. This definition includes sexual abuse or sexual exploitation of the child (Commonwealth Department of Health, 1987, p. 1).

The fact that many definitions exist to explain the abuse and violence meted out to children within the safe confines of their family would seem to show how reluctant society still is in tackling the problem, or in admitting its role in the condoning of the abuse. However, the lack of a universal definition could also be attributed to confusion as society comes to terms with added information and knowledge on child sexual assault. For example, incest in the earliest times referred to the act of sexual intercourse between blood relatives and did not take into account defacto relationships or close family friends.

Whatever definition is given, it is clear that incest/child sexual abuse leaves deep and lasting scars. Some of the most devastating results of this imposition of adult sexuality upon a child are the irretrievable loss of the child's inviolability and trust in her or his life (Butler, 1978). As well as a loss of trust, the child may show signs of self-mutilation, depression, anxiety, intellectual "problems" and an inability to form relationships. The act of incest can be imposed by father onto daughters or sons, by mothers onto their sons and daughters, by siblings or by any close member of the family, for example, grandparents, aunts and uncles. In many countries the act of incest/child sexual abuse is a criminal act.

Reporting of this offence has increased over the last 20 years, largely due to the second wave feminist movement's determination to place it on the public agenda alongside the issue of rape. The 'problems' of incest, together with rape, domestic violence and other forms of abuse, brought into light again in the 1970s are repeatedly being 'uncovered' and then repressed or intellectualised as a way of 'blaming' the victim. For example, in 1930, feminists ran a specific campaign on sexual offences against children and again in 1955 (Hooper 1992). For various reasons that will be explained later in this paper, it was not until the women's movement of the 1970s that it was possible for the information on incest to reach the victims themselves. The information and research has been difficult to suppress this time around as the victims of incest added information of their own to the growing body of research and literature on the subject (Herman, 1981).

Susan Brownmiller (1975) exposed many myths and preconceptions surrounding rape and incest in her pioneering book **Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape**. Brownmiller supported and quoted Florence Rush, feminist social worker and writer, in exposing the (in)famous Dr. Kinsey<sup>1</sup> and his study of American sexuality in the 1940s as being arrogant and unable to imagine that a sexual assault on a child constituted a gross and devastating shock and insult to that child. Kinsey stated that he "found it difficult to understand why a child should be disturbed by having its genitalia touched or disturbed by seeing the genitalia of another person" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 276). The studies by Kinsey became well known in the US and overseas and while many of the previously taboo subjects such as masturbation, homosexuality between men and extramarital sex received an enormous amount of attention, little attention was given to the finding of child sexual abuse. Kinsey himself, while not denying that child sexual abuse occurred, did much to minimise its importance (Herman, 1981). He placed the "blame" for any child's distress over sexual abuse on prudish parents or other adults who were inducing "hysteria" onto



the child. Brownmiller describes Kinsey as America's own original sex expert who had a great deal of trouble coming to terms with his own findings, such as that 80% of the women interviewed had had unwanted sexual experiences with their fathers (1976, p. 277).

Hysteria was the term used by another (in)famous and influential male who stated that women fantasised their sexual abuse. In his paper, *The Aetiology of Hysteria* (1896), Freud reported that childhood sexual trauma lay at the origin of every case of hysteria but he refused to blame or even admit that the fathers were the perpetrators. According to Freud, these women, who were his patients, had fantasised the sexual abuse their fathers had inflicted upon them because Freud believed every young girl had an inherent desire to seduce her father. Presumably Freud believed that because the fathers of these young girls would not allow the seduction they, the young girls, fantasised the event. Consequently, when they became adults, they were horrified about their fantasies and so invented stories of being sexually abused by their fathers (Masson, 1984). This attitude persists today and I agree with Herman (1981) who argues that Freud's repudiation of his clients' experiences resulted in a prejudice which remains amongst professions as well as the public as they assume that children lie about their sexual abuse and girls seduce their fathers.

Despite efforts by earlier feminists to raise public awareness from as far back as the 1870s, the public has preferred to accept reports and theories such as Freud and Kinsey (Brownmiller, 1975). The beliefs of such influential men added to the "traditional" belief that men are naturally sexually aggressive and that women somehow misinterpreted their own experiences. Four large surveys on sexual abuse of children carried out in the United States in the 1970s showed that one in four girls and one in seven boys had been sexually assaulted by a family member. In 97% of the cases studied, the father was the offender while the mother was the offender in 3% (Herman, 1981). The results of these surveys confirm the results of another study carried out in the early 1950s and published in 1955. Unfortunately, this report, coming as it did just two years after the Kinsey Report (1953), was ignored and received no public response (Herman, 1981).

Through the efforts of those feminists of the 1970s (and earlier feminist efforts) we now have a clearer idea of the abuse suffered by children within the confines of the family. In 1993, sexual abuse of children is the largest single type of abuse against children under 16. Girls are more likely to be victims of sexual assault than boys and girls are more likely than boys to be sexually assaulted by a member of their own family (56%). Boys are more likely to be

assaulted by a person known to them (56%) than a family member (40%). Less than 5% of abuse was perpetrated by a stranger (Health Minister's Advisory Council, 1993, p. 41).

\* \* \*

In her historical analysis, Davis (1973) argues that the incest taboo has come from the necessity to control men's lust and that the Church's ban on cousin marriage has no basis in genetics but comes from the very earliest need for women to protect themselves and their daughters from marauding bands of adult males. In the early days of Christianity, a person committed incest if they married their thirty-second cousin. Incest laws and prohibitions have historically been concerned with keeping blood relatives from marrying each other (Justice and Justice, 1979). This served to ensure the survival of societies, their economic welfare and cooperation between people. Without a taboo on incest, societies would have had no reason to expand and include, or be interested in, people outside their own small group (Justice and Justice, 1979).<sup>2</sup>

Why is the taboo of mother/son incest stronger than father/daughter? I would argue that it is the assumed role of woman as nurturer and father as provider combined with the historical concept that women and children are the property of men that enables father/daughter incest to be taken less seriously. Most victims of father/daughter incest report that the family was completely dominated by the father who often used force to assert his absolute authority (Herman, 1981). This control over the family by the father has its roots in ancient history and the advent of Christianity endorsed and encouraged this control. The effect of Christianity to control women cannot be underestimated. From the earliest times, the Church sought to diminish the role of women. Women were considered less than men. The laws and stories about rape and incest further suggested that women were mere chattels of men or that they were responsible for any sexual act against them. There are many examples of patriarchal bias and attitudes of "blame the victim" among the patriarchal Biblical stories. The story of Tamar (11 Samuel: 13) shows that the concern was not for her rape but for the damage done to a man's property. The Old Testament laws in Deuteronomy (22: 23-29) address the sexual assault of women and girls also as a crime of property. The penalty for rape is either to pay the father for damage or to marry the abused (Fortune, 1983).

The changes occurring in society at the time of the Reformation had devastating results for women. The Pauline doctrine of Original Sin and the culpability of women for the downfall of humankind was well entrenched.<sup>3</sup> Women were considered essentially evil and, thus, often horrific punishment

was justified. In the late 15th century a text written by Dominicans, supported by both the Catholic and Protestant churches entitled **Malleus Mallificarum**, the **Hammer of Witches** was published.<sup>4</sup> These witches, and women in general, were seen as a threat to the social order. Marriage in this environment offered relative safety for women. The Puritans of the late 16th and early 17th centuries viewed marriage as the only solution to moral life. Not only did marriage condone the sexual act and the reproduction of children, it was now idealised as a place of affection and love. The Protestants changed the role of marriage within social life and introduced the idea of married love and relationships between partners became central, above that of extended kin. These changes played a part in the shift from a kin-oriented family to what we now term a "nuclear" family.

At this time of social and family change, the roles of the head of the household and those previously undertaken by the church, were combined. The moral control of the family was shared between priest and husband/father. The male's right to control his family was vested in him by the church. The Bible became the book of rules for the running of the household. In this context, women were more clearly the property of men.

Biblical law was, and is addressed to men. It is assumed that men initiate and women submit to sexual relations (Herman, 1981, p. 61).

The wording of God's law in regard to incest makes it clear that the offence is against men and their property, not against the woman or child in question. The Bible cites every conceivable breach of the incest act **except** that of father/daughter rape (Herman 1981). As mentioned previously, the prohibition on incest was now essentially to protect the man's property or any violation of that property. Men are seen as the superior being and it is his right, as God's chosen head of the household, to use the women of his family. Consider for example, the father's role in giving his daughter to another in marriage, a tradition that continues today. So it follows that a man's rights have been violated if the women in his household are tampered with (Herman 1981). When a woman marries, it is assumed that the sexual satisfaction of the male is inherent within that union. Man sees the taking of sexual pleasure as his right, he does not always keep this right to sex to his wife alone. The right belongs to the male, women have not right to protest.

The man who has the power to give a woman away also has the power to take her for himself. That power can be contested only

by other men, not by the women who are given or taken. No kinsman, and certainly no man outside the family, is in a position to challenge a father's power over his daughters. Thus the rule of the gift is breached most commonly where it is least capable of enforcement, that is, in the relationship between fathers and daughters (Herman, 1981, p. 62).

If other men did challenge this man's right of "gift" then this would imply that he no longer had that right himself. In the mid 1600s, the law of England was brought into line with the law of the Church and the death penalty was given for adultery. However, the law, as well as the church, was biased against women. Only women were guilty of adultery: men were guilty of fornication, which carried a lesser punishment (Crawford, 1983).

The transformation of pre-modern society from an agricultural to an industrial, modern one further alienated the nuclear family from its extended kin networks. Industrialisation saw the move from rural to urban environments and more women became confined to the isolation and privacy of the home. At first, whole families needed to work in the factories as the wage of the man was insufficient. With increased mechanisation and better technology came the release of a lot of women and children from this work. Many working class women began to aspire to the ideals of the middle class (Summers, 1975). The themes of middle class ideology for the nuclear family were adopted. Ideas such as women as nurturers and men as breadwinners, the privacy of the family and accepted forms of child rearing were central to this ideology. This new family form grew alongside the new economic system (Summers 1975). Patriarchy, the family and capital became intertwined in the oppression of women and in the ignoring of sexual abuse of children. This "new" family form and the roles structured within it further enhanced man's authority over his family and his right to sexual satisfaction. Furthermore, the home was portrayed as the place to go to after a busy tiring day — it was a place to feel secure and in control. Home was the safe haven to return to after the day's work. The Catholic Church continued its influence and was instrumental in its definition of roles within this "new" family form.<sup>5</sup> The home was the private domain of the family, events that occurred within those family walls were of no concern to outsiders and women had no right to complain.

This new family form and change in its place in society served several purposes and two ideas were crucial to this development — privacy and the concept of childhood. Children prior to the 18th century were seen as a smaller version of an adult. This new middle class concept now regarded children as

unique and irreplaceable. In the period from the 1890s to the 1960s, the ideal woman was a "good mother" (Matthews, 1984). New notions on mothering brought with them total responsibility of the mother for her children's health and safety. The mother became responsible for the moral development of her children as well as her husband.<sup>6</sup>

Concern about child prostitution in England in the 1890s raised public awareness of what we now refer to as child sexual abuse. In 1889, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children drew attention to the abuse of children in the privacy of their homes (Hooper, 1992). Several campaigns were held by "social purity" movements and others, including feminists, to bring about legal reform and punishment for crimes of incest. These early feminist movements had faith that the legal system would help solve the problem of incest. Some success was achieved including the legislation of the *Punishment of Incest Act* (1908) which made incest a criminal, rather than religious offence (Hooper, 1992). While legal reforms can be seen as a part of the overall social reform it is never enough. The law is a patriarchal institution with its traditions in church law and has never provided protection for women and girls from male violence (Hooper 1992). The law is a precise institution, based on religious law and as I have shown, religious law works to oppress women and essentially sees women as men's property.<sup>7</sup> The law focuses on punishment and control, not protection and change. The offender is often not the one punished. Most legislation and legal debate surrounding incest, which has been supported by feminists, has concentrated on the moral control of young women, not on their moral danger. Young women and children who are considered in need of moral protection are removed from their homes and every effort is made to rehabilitate the father. This has the effect of giving "hidden" messages to society which convey that: (1) it is the child who is partly to blame as she is the one that is removed; (2) also to blame is the primary care giver (in most cases the mother) who, as we have seen, still essentially has responsibility for moral control in the family; (3) the role of the father is diminished, and he, rather than the child, appears to be the victim.

The 19th century feminists as well as the Women's Freedom League had great faith in the legal system to provide answers to problems of abuse. Many feminists were more concerned to focus on women's right to say "no" to unwanted sex rather than the dangers of sexual abuse. Acknowledgment must be made of these women for their efforts. However, while feminists concentrated on their right to sexual freedom, many women and girls were suffering sexual abuse. The result was that the issue of sexual abuse was placed on the 'back burner' for social and legal reform while other issues dominated

(Hooper, 1992). In arguing that the "enormity" of the issues "threatens not only male concepts of justice, but the organisation of society itself" Jocelyn Scutt points out that:

the response to feminist demands for reform has too often led to superficial changes, failing to address the deep seated ideology of ownership of women and children which underlies problems in eliminating child sexual abuse (1991, p. 118).

\* \* \*

Since the 1970s, feminists have again brought sexual abuse and violence to the forefront of public awareness. Unfortunately, however, the focus of the debate is still in defining what constitutes abuse and the solution is still seen to be to "correct" the father's behaviour and reunite the family rather than look at society's role in condoning violence within the family. Far from a place of safety, the home can become and is, for some women and children, a place of domination, submission and abuse. The home, for many of these women and children, is not a place of safety and love but one of hate, hurt and terror. In arguing the incestuous advances of fathers towards their daughters from a feminist perspective, the power dynamics within the family and the impact of institutionalised patriarchy need to be examined. The historical patriarchal view that women are men's property to do with as they will has been supported by all the major societal institutions. Women's status is now quite different to those who lived in previous centuries. Nevertheless, I would argue that the views and suspicions about women from previous centuries still influence thinking today.

\* \* \*

I have briefly outlined the historical role of the Christian church in the ideology of the family as a place of love and safety and how that ideology influenced other influential texts and studies on women, from the **Malleus Mallificarum** and the Bible to the Kinsey Report and Freud's analysis. Society is socialised through such works to believe that women are secondary to men and that women are responsible for their sexuality and men's sexual abuse towards them. The ideas and theories propounded were used to influence the structure of the "nuclear family" and the concept of privacy within that family. Our modern society remains a patriarchal one, upholding men's assumed right to rule over the family. Women remain in a dependent/nurturing/caring role and men in the authoritarian/breadwinning role, a fact which allows the oppression of women and sexual violence to them and children to

continue. All of these factors combine to allow the secret condoning of abuse within the privacy of the family.

This paper has been very difficult to research and write. However, despite the pain, emotion and sheer exhaustion I felt in confronting the issue, every moment has been worthwhile as I now have a much deeper understanding of why society turns a blind eye to acts of sexual abuse. I will never condone the silence that surrounds violence of any kind and especially the sexual violence of children. As a feminist, I will do whatever I can to lessen the actions and impact that sexual abuse has on our society. Feminists of all persuasions need to be active in reducing, if not eliminating, all forms of child violence in our society. We cannot afford that this issue be buried again — too many children have been buried already.

## References

- Allen, J. (1986). Evidence and silence: Feminism and the limits of history. In C. Pateman and E. Gross (Eds.). (pp. 173-189). **Feminist challenges: Social and political theory**. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Barry, K. (1984). Female sexual slavery. In A. Jagger and P. Rothenberg-Sirval (Eds.). **Feminist frameworks**. (pp. 405-416). (2nd Ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Brownmiller, S. (1975). **Against our will: Men, women and rape**. London: Secker and Warburg.
- Burton, C. (1981). Engels, The origin of the family and feminist theory. In N. Grieve and P. Grimshaw (Eds.). **Australian women: Feminist perspectives**. (pp. 3-14). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, S. (1978) **Conspiracy of silence: The trauma of incest**. San Francisco: Volcano Press.
- Child Sexual Abuse Task Force. (1987) **A report to the Government of Western Australia**. Perth: Department of Premier and Cabinet.
- Crawford, P. (1983). From the woman's view: Pre-industrial England 1500-1750. In P. Crawford (Ed.). **Exploring women's past**. (pp. 49-85). Melbourne: Sisters Publishing.



- Curthoys, A. (1981). The sexual division of labour under capitalism. In N. Grieve and P. Grimshaw (Eds.). **Australian women: Feminist perspectives.** (pp. 39-43). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Daly, M. (1991). The spiritual dimension of women's liberation. In S. Gunew (Ed.). **A reader in feminist knowledge.** (pp. 335-341). London: Routledge.
- Davis, E.G. (1973). **The first sex.** Baltimore: Penguin.
- Edwards, A. (1987). Male violence in feminist theory: An analysis of the changing conceptions of sex/gender violence and male dominance. In J. Hanmer and M. Maynard (Eds.). **Women, violence and social control.** (pp. 13-29). New York: Longman.
- Fortune, M. (1983). **Sexual violence: The unmentionable sin.** New York: Pilgrim Press.
- Hawthorn, S. (1991). In defence of separatism. In S. Gunew (Ed.). **A reader in feminist knowledge.** (pp. 312-318). London: Routledge.
- Health Minister's Advisory Council (1993). **Health goals and targets for Australian women.** Commonwealth Department of Health Minister's Advisory Council Subcommittee on Women and Health. Canberra: AGPS.
- Health Ministers of Australia (1989). **National women's health policy. Advancing women's health in Australia.** A report presented in Burnie, Tasmania on 21 March 1989. Canberra; AGPS.
- Herman, J. (1981). **Father-daughter incest.** Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Hooper, C. (1992). Child sexual abuse and the regulation of women: Variations on a theme. In C. Smart (Ed.). **Regulating womanhood. Historical essays on marriage, motherhood and sexuality.** (pp. 53-77). London: Routledge.
- Justice, B. and Justice, R. (1979). **The broken taboo: Sex in the family.** New York: Human Sciences Press.



- Kempe, R. and Kempe, C. (1984). **The common secret: Sexual abuse of children and adolescents.** New York: W.H. Freeman.
- Matthews, J.J. (1984). **Good and mad women: The historical construction of femininity in twentieth-century Australia.** Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
- Masson, J.M. (1984). **The assault on truth.** Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Meiselman, K. (1978). **Incest.** San Francisco: Jossey Bass.
- Millett, K. (1972). **Sexual politics.** London: Abacus.
- Mitchell, J. (1971). **Women's estate.** Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Pascall, G. (1986). **Social policy. A feminist analysis.** London: Tavistock Routledge.
- Pateman, C. (1986). The marriage contract. In N. Grieve and A. Burns (Eds.), **Australian women: New feminist perspectives.** (pp. 172-181). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Rowland, R. (1988). **Woman herself.** Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Rowland, R. and Klein, R. (1991). Radical feminism: Introduction. In S. Gunew (Ed.), **A reader in feminist knowledge.** (pp. 305-307). London: Routledge.
- Rubin, G. (1984). The traffic in women: Notes on the "political economy" of sex. In A. Jagger and P. Rothenburg-Sirval (Eds.), **Feminist frameworks.** (2nd Edition). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Simms, M. (1981). The Australian feminist experience. In N. Grieve and P. Grimshaw (Eds.), **Australian women: Feminist perspectives** (pp. 227-239). Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Summers, A. (1974). **Mad whores and God's police. The colonization of women in Australia.** Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Taylor, B. (1991). Lords of creation: Marxism, feminism and "utopian" socialism. In S. Gunew (Ed.). **A reader in feminist knowledge**. (pp. 360-365). London: Routledge.
- Twitchell, J. (1987). **Forbidden partners: The incest taboo in modern culture**. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Vance, C. (1984). Pleasure and danger: Towards a politics of sexuality. In C. Vance (Ed.). **Pleasure and danger: Exploring female sexuality**. (pp. 1-27). Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- York, J., Leonard, D., Liensol, C., Chester, G., Warrick, J., Sebestyen, A., Henderson, R. and Pachachi, R. (1991). We are the feminists that women have warned us about. In S. Gunew (Ed.). **A reader in feminist knowledge**. (pp. 308-311). London: Routledge.

- <sup>1</sup> Alfred Kinsey (1894-1956). American whose major survey of American men and women in the late 1940s formed the basis of many analyses of human behaviour.
- <sup>2</sup> There are three major aspects to the debate around the incest taboo: the biological, which prevents inbreeding; the psychological that creates the family; and the social that creates kinship (Herman, 1981). None of these theories fully explain the reasons why some mothers, but mostly fathers, inflict sexual abuse on their children by breaking with this taboo (Herman, 1981).
- <sup>3</sup> See Julie Whittle's essay in this collection.
- <sup>4</sup> This was reproduced some 29 times until 1669 and described women as "evil, subject to carnal lust, weak, impressionable, defective, impulsive and liars by nature" (Fortune, 1981, p. 61). The churches used this text to justify the torture, sadism and sexual violence which led to the murder of many thousands of women. The assumption in this text was that mortal men did not rape, it was the devil's work and women must have encouraged his actions.
- <sup>5</sup> Summers quotes the Catholic Weekly (25.2.1953): "the good wife realises that in becoming a wife she contracts to forget self and put her husband's happiness above her own...in the marriage contract she handed over the right of her body...she contracted to make a home for her husband...in her household tasks she tries to be perfect that he may think of no place as more pleasant than his home..." (1975, p. 145).
- <sup>6</sup> This attitude can be traced back to its roots in the Church and in the writings of Rousseau, who argued that marriage was an ideal state that had clearly defined sex roles of men and women.
- <sup>7</sup> The husband is still seen to have the legal right to enforce sexual pleasure over his wife. Recent outrage by the public over remarks made by a judge, that a husband can exert reasonable force to obtain sex from his wife, strengthen my argument that men still feel they have inherent right to a woman's body. A father can easily influence his child to assume this "right" includes her.

---

## Essay Ten: Fertility Cycle Control: Abortion and the Medical Profession. A Feminist Analysis.

Carol O'Donnell

---

*The ideologies of Church, State and the medical profession coalesce around the abortion debate. In this historical analysis, Carol O'Donnell outlines the connections between the three patriarchal institutions and the way they impact on current family planning practices and women's choice.*

Abortion is defined as the "termination of pregnancy" (Humm, 1989, p. 1). I intend to examine the medical profession's impact on the abortion debate and its influence on the State. The main questions addressed in this essay will centre around how the medical profession influenced the State's stance on abortion, what influence the Church had on the medical profession, and how family planning was important to the birth control and abortion movement. Control of women's fertility cycles by the State, the medical profession and Church will be analysed. For reasons of practicality, this analysis of abortion will be limited to the 19th and 20th centuries only, even though abortion was mentioned in Anglo-Saxon laws as early as the 12th century and the practice of abortion existed well before this. A socialist feminist perspective has been adopted as I believe the State, through the medical profession and Church, to be at the centre of the fight for control over women's fertility cycle. I believe it is only through external pressure on the patriarchal State that women will gain control over the right to birth control and reproduction.

\* \* \*

In the early 19th century, the Church held the major influence over the State in its formulation of laws against abortion. In Great Britain at this time, abortion was a common law misdemeanour after "quickening" had been reached (the time when the mother first felt foetus movement). The Church believed that the first movement of the foetus signified the soul entering the foetus and its transition from a foetus into a living human being (Brookes, 1988, p. 22). This was the basis of Lord Ellenborough's Act in 1803 which distinguished between abortion before and after quickening. This was an attempt to enshrine the quickening as a criterion which distinguished between human and non-human, thus giving tentative approval of abortion before quickening. The greater severity of the distinction made between abortion before and after "ensoulment" by the Catholic Church impacted on women as the law punished abortion before ensoulment with transportation, but abortion performed after ensoulment, which was considered a sin by the Church, was punishable by death (Brookes, 1988, p. 25).

---

The medical profession was unhappy with Lord Ellenborough's Act as it relied upon women's subjective experience of pregnancy for the quickening distinction. The medical profession wanted the law to reflect their "scientific" understanding of the beginning of life by moving it away from what was seen as still a semi-mystical experience. In this way, the medical profession also wanted control of the fertility cycle of women removed from women's hands and placed under their own control (Brookes, 1988, p. 25).

At the instigation of the medical profession, the law, made and enforced by men, over-rode traditional reliance on women's immediate experience of foetal movement as a meaningful stage of development and designated women as criminal for any interference in their own pregnancy. The 1838 *British Offences Against the Person Act* is an example of the influence of the medical profession on the State when the distinction of before and after quickening was abandoned in the law. The basis of this Act was to negate the gap between abortion and murder and as the scientific community at that time had no replacement for the quickening, abortion at any point continued to be considered illegal until 1929 (Brookes, 1988, p. 25). The medical profession's belief that fertility control belonged in their hands and not in the hands of women was clearly illustrated in 1861 with the enactment of the *Offences Against the Person Act*, which specifically named the woman herself for the first time as being equally liable for prosecution if procuring an abortion (Brookes, 1988, p. 25-26).

Throughout the centuries, it had been the act of killing an embryo once it had been given its soul that the Catholic Church considered a sin. However, in 1869, the Church changed its stance on abortion, stating now that women should be punished for having abortions even before ensoulment took place. This was an indirect influence of the 1838 Act which removed quickening as an abortion criterion (Brookes, 1988, p. 26). The decision taken by the Church to change its stance is an indication of the influence science wielded during this time and the Church was in effect punishing women for taking control of their own pregnancy and fertility. A woman could now be excommunicated for procuring an abortion at any stage of her pregnancy, whereas traditionally, if an abortion was performed before ensoulment this was considered a lesser sin and excommunication was not an option.

The influence of the patriarchal medical profession upon the State was evident when the arbitrary distinction reliant upon medical judgement was later introduced into the law in 1929 as the *Infant Life (Preservation) Act*, replacing the quickening distinction reliant on a woman's response to

pregnancy, which had been dropped nearly a century before. This Act stipulated 28 weeks as the point of viability, when a child was designated capable of being born alive. Abortion after this date could only be performed to save the mother's life (Brookes, 1988, p. 27). Women's experience in pregnancy was not recognised, nor was their opinion regarding abortion sought.

Since the Age of Enlightenment, there had been a move away from mystical religious beliefs towards technology and science, with the medical profession at the forefront as an emerging "science". Consequently, by the beginning of the 20th century, the power base shifted control from the Church to the medical profession. Abortions could only legally be performed by a medical practitioner. Only **clinical** concerns were taken into consideration by the medical profession when considering the grounds for abortion. Therapeutic abortions, when the mother's life was at risk, was the only legally acceptable ground for an abortion. **Compassionate** factors, such as an unwanted pregnancy out of wedlock, living in abject poverty and so on were considered irrelevant and ignored by the medical profession (Brookes, 1986, p. 328).

In this way, the rights of the woman over her own body and fertility had taken second place to the control held by the medical profession. It was considered inappropriate for the female patient to ask the practitioner for medical operations. The profession had no wish to be dictated to by its patients, as this relegated them to a subservient semi-skilled level and threatened their dearly held and jealously guarded professional status. This fear of non-professional status formed the basis of medical attitudes surrounding fertility control. The medical profession made its feelings quite clear with regard to requests for operations by women with the following statement that appeared in a medical text at this time:

The medical profession has never recognised that patients have a right to give its members such orders as to disconnect the Fallopian tubes from the uterus, as they might order their plumber to disconnect the supply pipe from their bath (Brookes, 1988, p. 59).

Eugenic reasons for pregnancy were also considered important by first wave feminists of Great Britain in 1900 who were careful not to upset conventional morality. They advocated child bearing but wanted to prevent birth where it would harm a woman's health, for eugenic reasons, or in cases of economic hardship. Contraception was seen as a lesser evil which would

prevent the greater evil of abortion. Few of these crusaders shared the modern view of the issue as one of women's rights. The right of women to an abortion was not considered until 35 years later (Siedlecky and Wyndham, 1990, p. 158).

Advances in medical techniques, which made induced abortion a safe procedure, served to heighten the ethical dilemma. Moralistic arguments when deciding upon the grounds for abortion were put forward by the medical profession. Pregnancy as the result of illicit intercourse, illegitimacy, rape, incest, vomiting or insanity were considered insufficient grounds for abortion (Rodman et al. 1987, p. 37). The medical profession considered that matters other than those of a purely clinical nature would open the floodgates and abortion would be performed for any sociological and sentimental reason — "what was morally wrong could not be scientifically right". The only chance women had of procuring a legal abortion was through risk of physical damage to themselves if the pregnancy continued (Brookes, 1988, p. 60).

The patriarchal entities of the medical profession and church in Great Britain held the view that women should not have control over their own fertility. This view was strengthened when Catholic doctors in the League of National Life raised religious and imperialist objections against abortion (Brookes, 1988, p. 63). Dr Halliday Sutherland denounced feminist claims that "a woman was under no obligation to her husband who supports her, or the State which safeguards her, or to the God who created her" and in 1932 Professor Sydney Smith criticised the "modern woman" who:

had her own point of view, and that was that she had control of her own body, and if she was not inclined to go through the trouble and inconvenience of child bearing there was no moral right to compel her to do so" (Brookes, 1988, p. 15).

Professor Smith dismissed this view as "illogical" because it denied the right of the State to exercise control over the destruction of its future citizens and his views echoed those of the "Populate or Perish" ideologies supported by the State at this time. Restrictive abortion laws were one obvious way of exercising this control. Abortion was the only operative procedure governed by the law, enacted by the State and not left entirely to the judgement of the medical profession (Brookes, 1988, p. 15).

Medical ideology at this time reflected an extreme version of a common assumption that a woman's sexual cycle was only completed through reproduction. Catholic medical practitioners commonly believed that

contraception caused sterility, a childless woman lost her beauty and abortion caused serious illness. Health for women was synonymous with marriage and children, spinsterhood was considered to thwart "natural instincts" and marriage without children was considered "unfulfilled". Family ideology at this time dictated that a woman married to have children. Doctors considered women's demands for effective fertility control as a violation of their natural maternal role (Brookes, 1988, p. 57). The perceived "selfishness" of women in their reluctance to fulfil their maternal role formed the basis of many medical attitudes to contraception. Women were blamed for low birth rates and fears of national extinction and race suicide exacerbated. Further objections put forward by the medical profession were that abortion and birth control challenged the nation's well-being because they were thought to undermine a central component of the State, the "nuclear family" (Brookes, 1988). Only a few voices were raised within the medical profession against compulsory maternity for women. When sex was separated from reproduction, the real threat appeared to be that women's rejection of motherhood would be hastened.

First wave feminists during this time focussed their efforts upon the impassioned plea for women's own lives and humanity to end the constant cycle of child bearing and physical exhaustion and advocated that a woman should have the freedom of her own body, to the extent that motherhood would become voluntary.<sup>1</sup> In the decades between the first and second wave of the Women's Movement, women in general remained on the medical and legal debate on abortion. The Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA) was formed in 1936 in Great Britain to make vocal the "opinion inarticulate in the lives of women." The ALRA founders believed that abortion was a "woman's question" and as such, women "should have the casting vote." Stella Brown, (an ALRA founder), argued for legalised abortion as an "absolute right", regardless of a woman's situation (Brookes, 1988, p. 79). The disregard of women's opinions regarding abortion was illustrated repeatedly by the medical profession, Church and State. Even when a committee was established in Great Britain in 1935 to review guidelines for therapeutic abortions, the committee, which consisted of thirteen representatives, comprised only three women, two of whom were titled ladies. The average middle class or working class woman had no avenue to voice her opinions (Brookes, 1988, p. 107).<sup>2</sup>

During the 1960s, abortion became a political issue with many prochoice feminist groups and pro-life groups lobbying the State to enact their views (Lovenduski and Outshoorn, 1986, p. 49). It was not until 1967 when the



*Abortion Act* became law in Great Britain that the category of those eligible for a legal abortion was again expanded. While not giving women the absolute right to choose to have an abortion, it did expand the reasons whereby a legal abortion could be sought. There were now four conditions under which abortion was legally permissible: risks to life; risks to physical and mental health; risks for the sake of others; and risks of having a handicapped child (Kenyon, 1986, p. 112). All of these criteria came under the control of the medical profession, thus, now legally giving this patriarchal entity control over women's fertility cycle. By the end of 1967 in Great Britain, it seemed that the issue had been settled once and for all. However, important amendments came before Parliament on ten occasions between 1967 and 1984, with eight of those occasions attempting to restrict the availability of legal abortion.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

From Federation, Abortion laws within Australia have been determined by each individual state. The Australian States generally followed Britain's lead when dealing with abortion laws. The most draconian laws were those contained in Queensland and Western Australia where abortion was a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment with hard labour for the woman herself and person(s) who assisted. Western Australian laws today remain considerably different to British law which allows abortion to be legal<sup>1</sup> performed under the circumstances outlined above. Western Australian laws on the other hand, permit legal abortion only if performed "in good faith for the purpose of preserving the life of the mother." The preservation of the life of the mother, however, includes both her physical health as well as her mental health. There must be a genuine belief by all concerned that the woman's physical, psychological and emotional well being would be endangered by the continuation of pregnancy (Family Planning, 1992, p. 6-7). Abortions performed for any other reason apart from those specifically mentioned under the WA Criminal Code may result in prosecution.<sup>4</sup>

Prior to 1960 in Australia, the State deferred to the medical profession on the topic of abortion. It was not until the early 1970s that the State came to the realisation that there was a need for a broader range of contraceptive options and a need to dilute the control of the medical profession by introducing Family Planning clinics. The realisation by the State that deferment to the medical profession was no longer a viable alternative was the same realisation reached by the first wave feminists in 1916. However, it was not until a politically active feminist lobby group was formed over 50 years later that the State was pressured into supporting Family Planning (Siedlecky and Wyndham, 1990, p. 59-60).

1916 saw three Australian feminists form the New South Wales Social Hygiene Association in an attempt to provide sex education. This society was short lived as current ideology at the time considered the topic of "sex" taboo. In 1926, this work was revived by six women who formed the Race Improvement Society (Siedlecky and Wyndham, 1990, p. 61-62). It was during the early part of the century that the pseudo-science of eugenics began to be seen as the "solution" to all of societal problems. The incorporation of eugenic principles into public policy was achieved through "expert testimony before legislative committees," specialists and practitioners. The control was over the fertility cycle of working class women (Petchesky, 1984, p. 86). It was not until 1933 that the first Australian Family Planning clinic was opened in NSW and began offering contraceptive advice. This advice, however, was only provided to married women and abortion would not be performed until a marriage certificate was produced. Formidable obstacles by the Church, State and medical profession were formed to resist attempts to spread to other states. Objections to family planning clinics were made by the medical profession on the grounds that their practice was threatened.

In 1960, after several name changes, the Family Planning Association of Australia (FPAA) came into being and it played a large part in raising public conscience and obtaining acceptance and availability of contraception, including abortion (Siedlecky and Wyndham, 1990, p. 168). The late 1960s saw the establishment of the Abortion Law Reform and Women's Liberation groups in the various states of Australia. These groups brought the subject of abortion and contraception into the public arena, which in turn forced the State to create Family Planning clinics. By early 1970, the family planning movement had spread to all states of Australia with the establishment of state family planning associations, expansion of clinic and education facilities and increased interest and influence of the medical profession (Siedlecky and Wyndham, 1990, p. 169).

The Church was also taking an active interest in family planning. A committee was set up by the Anglican Church to look at abortion and recommended that increased community attention should be given to improving family planning services and providing information to poor women (Siedlecky and Wyndham, 1990, p. 173). The involvement of the patriarchal State in establishing and running Family Planning clinics meant it maintained control over its citizens. The change of stance by the medical profession and Church from one of opposition to acceptance and constructive input may be attributed to the desire to influence the State's thinking on family planning.

This could only be achieved through an association with family planning itself.

The success of contraceptive programs were dependent upon many factors including the efficiency of the methods used, community acceptance and access to family planning services. Education of the community and health professionals as well as school sex education programs were seen as crucial to the work of family planning associations.<sup>5</sup> The Australian Federation of Family Planning Associations (AFFPA) was formally incorporated in 1975 after intense debate over its constitution and functions (Siedlecky and Wyndham, 1990, p. 175).<sup>6</sup> In 1985 AFFPA changed its name to the Family Planning Federation of Australia (FPFA) (Siedlecky and Wyndham, 1990, p. 177). Women's complaints over decades that their concerns were trivialised and viewed with "some amusement" by doctors were finally being taken seriously. Family planning associations, predominantly run by lay women and women professions, traditionally adopted a preventative health care focus (Siedlecky and Wyndham, 1990). In this way, control of women's fertility was being removed from a patriarchal entity and returned to women's, albeit professional women's, hands.

FPA/WA had its origins in the abortion debate with the idea of a branch of the Racial Hygiene Association dating back to 1958. The first clinic in WA was opened in 1972 in a child health centre with a grant from the State Government (Siedlecky and Wyndham, 1990, p. 190). By providing funding to the Family Planning Associations, the State maintained control over its population. The medical profession as a whole still held strong opinions regarding abortion. Society's attitude to birth control in Australia at this time was very prudish and sex was considered a private matter, discussion of which was taboo in public (Siedlecky and Wyndham, 1990).<sup>7</sup>

\* \* \*

After the political and social changes of the 1960s and the increased activity by second wave feminists over birth control issues, the 1970s saw a return to more conservative attitudes which extended throughout that and into the next decade. Over the last two decades, abortion has been a controversial topic within the medical and legal profession, Church and State.<sup>8</sup> The difference is that women are now part of the debate although it remains as controversial as it was 150 years ago.

Within Western Australia, the abortion debate is also highly volatile. The last few months of 1993 have seen the much publicised debate centering around the proposed plans to co-locate the public hospital services in Bunbury with the private St. John of God Hospital. A major stumbling block of this proposal was that the current public hospital provides sterilisation and abortion operations and offers contraceptive advice. If the public hospital services came under the control of the private Catholic hospital system, none of these services would be provided. The Church, a traditional patriarchal entity, is still actively campaigning against any form of artificial birth control, be it in the form of abortion, sterilisation, or contraceptive information. If this proposal at Bunbury was to proceed, women from the South West would be forced to Perth to exercise their right to these essential health services. However, women's interest groups have provided sufficient public pressure that the State was forced to abandon these proposed plans.

Although abortion and sterilisation services are available in public hospitals today, there are still strict guidelines governing the eligibility of legal abortions. These laws enacted by the State were influenced by the Church and medical profession. However, since women are now becoming a much more politically active force in society, the State is becoming more sensitive to women's issues. This may inevitably result in the complete decriminalisation of abortion. If this occurs, will the medical profession, which is responsible for the performance of these operations, impose their own moral codes to replace those abandoned by the State?

Historically, the medical profession has sought control of the issue through the State. However, if the State no longer deferred control to the medical profession, it would be forced to impose its own moral code to maintain control. Therefore, even if control of abortion by the State was released through decriminalisation, women would still not have true freedom of choice as they would be required to defer to the medical profession's moral views in order to solicit their assistance with an operation. True freedom of choice would allow a woman to procure an abortion pill, such as RU-486, from a pharmacy outlet without having to go through a medical practitioner. However, approval of such drugs is dependent upon acceptance by the medical profession and the State and thus the patriarchal merry-go-round continues. It is only through pressure applied externally to the State that women will gain control of their fertility cycle and the right to birth control.

## References

- ALRA (WA) (1993). **The legal right to abortion**. The Association for the Legal Right to Abortion (WA) Inc. Perth.
- Brookes, B. (1988). **Abortion in England 1900-1967**. London: Croom Helm.
- Humm, M. (1989). **The dictionary of feminist theory**. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Kenyon, E. (1986). **The dilemma of abortion**. London: Faber and Faber.
- Lovenduski, J. and Outshoorn, J. (1986). **The new politics of abortion**. Berkeley: Sage.
- Luker, K. (1984). **Abortion and the politics of motherhood**. London: University of California Press.
- Petchesky, R. P. (1986). **Abortion and woman's choice**. London: Verso.
- Rodman, H., Sarvis, B. and Bonar, J. (1987). **The abortion question**. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Siedlecky, S. and Wyndham, D. (1990). **Populate and perish: Australian women's fight for birth control**. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

- <sup>1</sup> This was not a *carte blanche* demand to seek sexual fulfillment, a freedom which was not argued for until the second wave feminist movement in the 1960s.
- <sup>2</sup> The committee recommended that in the case of rape, criminal assault, incest or when a woman's health was endangered by further pregnancy, legal abortion should be permissible. The medical profession and State did not consider these factors important. Thus, this recommendation (excluding the health risks) is yet to be enacted over 50 years later.
- <sup>3</sup> The most serious of these attacks on the abortion provision included the reduction of the upper time limit from 28 to 20 weeks; the reduction of social grounds for abortion; and an extension of the "conscience" clause so that any doctor or nurse could refuse to take part in abortions on moral grounds. Two of these three proposed clauses now came within the medical profession's purview (Kenyon, 1986).
- <sup>4</sup> Regulations relating to abortion in the WA Criminal Code (1992) can be found in Ch. XXVI (199, 200 & 201) as well as Ch. XXVI (259). No mention is made of any other reasons for abortion such as abnormalities, economic factors or rape/incest (WA Criminal Code 1992).
- <sup>5</sup> In 1973, the ALRA and the Women's Movement handed out leaflets outside schools, advising young people on contraception and where they could go for advice.
- <sup>6</sup> Family Planning Associations were now well identified with the wider issues of women's reproductive health and were no longer restricted to contraceptive services only. More recently, they have moved to the forefront of education on sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, cervical cancer and infertility.
- <sup>7</sup> During the 1970s, many doctors were still unwilling to prescribe for unmarried women and as a result FPA/WA clinics had more single than married women clients. These valued the clinic's expertise on contraception and confidentiality.
- <sup>8</sup> Certain factions within the abortion debate have resorted to extreme measures. In May 1993, a Florida (USA) doctor who operated in a woman's clinic which provided abortions was murdered by an anti-abortion protestor. Throughout the last decade, arson and bombings of abortion clinics have increased, the number of protesters outside clinics has grown and threats received have intensified. In June 1993, an abortion clinic in Montana (USA) burned down (*Pro-choice News*, 1993, p. 7). The irony here being that these factions who profess to hold all human life sacred, including that which is unborn, resort to the taking of human life to convey their message.



## About the Publisher

---

The Centre for the Development of Human Resources is located on the Joondalup campus of Edith Cowan University, Perth, WA within the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences. The Centre undertakes high quality research, teaching, consultancy and publishing activities in the human services field, particularly in the area of services for people with disabilities. The Centre's activities are underpinned by the belief that human services should be based on an explicit social justice values base which asserts the worth and dignity of people, and by a commitment to Social Role Valorisation theory.

In terms of its publishing activities, the Centre has been publishing the work of staff in the Faculty of Health and Human Sciences since 1987. Its current emphasis is to publish work in the human services field, particularly in relation to disability services, as this reflects the priorities and interests of the Centre. The publications focus on issues which are relevant to intellectual, physical and psychiatric disabilities and disabilities associated with ageing. They are largely intended to be of interest to people working in the human services field and students. Titles currently available from the Centre include:

*The Nature and Purposes of Advocacy for People with Disabilities;*

*Nulsen Haven Inc: A History;*

*Untying the Knot: A Socialist-Feminist Analysis of the Social Construction of Care;*

*Human Services: Australian Explorations;*

*Encouraging a Paradigm Shift in Services for People with  
Disabilities;*

*Out of the Ashes: An Innovative Service Response Following a Hostel Fire.*

Further information about the Centre's titles, its publishing activities, and how to submit a manuscript for consideration are available from the Centre's Publications Manager, Michelle Stanton, at the Joondalup campus of Edith Cowan University, Joondalup Drive, Joondalup, WA, 6027.